



MUSCLES

ARE
BETTER
THAN

MAGIC!

NOVEL

3

WRITTEN BY
DORANEKO

ILLUSTRATED BY
RELUCY





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Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Life in a New Land](#)

[Chapter 2: Glasses are a Sign of Intellectualism](#)

[Chapter 3: A Duel with a Red Girl](#)

[Chapter 4: Secret Incident](#)

[Chapter 5: Yuri vs. Filia](#)

[Chapter 6: If You Catch a Cold, Take Care of Yourself](#)

[Chapter 7: Donuts Are Delicious](#)

[Chapter 8: Gorillalas Are a Lot like Gorillas](#)

[Chapter 9: Ashley's Village and Visitors](#)

[Chapter 10: People Who Don't Build Walls Tend to Get Along
with Others Easily](#)

[Chapter 11: Is a Donut Hole a Donut?](#)

[Chapter 12: Why Are You Crying?](#)

[Chapter 13: On the Night of the Full Moon](#)

[Chapter 14: With the Moon Shining Down on Us](#)

[Chapter 15: Festivals Are Fun](#)

[Chapter 16: Farewells](#)

[Character Design](#)

[DORANEKO Author Profile](#)

[Newsletter](#)





YURI

FILIA

**"You cretin! How dare you
humiliate me like this?"**

"How is this my fault?"

"FLAME PRINCESS" ASHLEY



LOLI LOLI LUKIS ISARETT

“Wow, this is awesome!”
the majin cooed.
“I mean, it was already amazing even from up above, but it’s even more awesome seeing it from up close!”

The majin approached the figure of the Fire God, almost as if she didn’t care one bit about the villagers fleeing in terror. For that matter, she didn’t seem to care about us either, even as we stood on high alert.

A character with short, light blue hair and a black turtleneck with a silver cross emblem is holding a large, golden-brown donut with a bite taken out of it. He is in a wooden structure, possibly a cafe or restaurant, with other patrons visible in the background. The character is looking down at the donut with a slight smile.

"I mean, really, as long as I have donuts, then I'm good. You know what I'm saying, ladies and gents? As long as you have donuts, life is all roses...no, I guess I should say life is all donuts! Get it?"

"Uh, no."

JAVAGUIR



MUSCLES **ARE BETTER THAN MAGIC!**

NOVEL



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RELUCY



Seven Seas Entertainment

MAHO? SONNAKOTOYORI KINNIKU DA! VOL.3

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Illustrated by Relucy

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	
CHAPTER 1	Life in a New Land
CHAPTER 2	Glasses Are a Sign of Intellectualism
CHAPTER 3	A Duel with a Red Girl
CHAPTER 4	Secret Incident
CHAPTER 5	Yuri vs. Filia
CHAPTER 6	If You Catch a Cold, Take Care of Yourself
CHAPTER 7	Donuts Are Delicious
CHAPTER 8	Gorillalas Are a Lot like Gorillas
CHAPTER 9	Ashley's Village and Visitors
CHAPTER 10	People Who Don't Build Walls Tend to Get Along with Others Easily
CHAPTER 11	Is a Donut Hole a Donut?
CHAPTER 12	Why Are You Crying?
CHAPTER 13	On the Night of the Full Moon
CHAPTER 14	With the Moon Shining Down on Us
CHAPTER 15	Festivals Are Fun
CHAPTER 16	Farewells

Prologue

THE BRIGHT SUN shone down on me. That sunlight, coupled with the occasional breeze and the cool, crisp air, was comfy enough that it made me wanna stretch, but it probably wouldn't have been the best idea, given my current situation, so I had to give up on it. Why? Well, I was climbing a cliff. Pretty solid incline, about 190 degrees. The face of the cliff was really easy to lose your grip on, and if I did, I was in for a loooooong slide down. A pretty precarious precipice, in my opinion!

Not that it was a particularly problematic precipice for me, considering my grip strength. Nah, powerfully pulling my person up the precipice with the potent puissance of my pfive pfingers? No problem!

"Hey, there's another one!" I called out to Filia.

"Oh, you're right!" Filia replied from behind me. She was close enough that I felt her breath lightly tickle my ears—which was to be expected, considering that I was carrying her on my back. Her beautiful silver hair tickled too.

Everything about Filia was gorgeous enough to captivate just about anyone; she had a slim, firm waist and long, slender, lily-white arms and legs. I bet a ton of people would have felt weird about being so physically close to such a cute elf, but I had no problems keeping my wits about me. The fact that her breasts—which were pushing against me at that very moment—were quite modest had nothing to do with it. We were just coworkers in the middle of carrying out a request.

I am a gentleman—specifically, a gentle muscle man! And a gentle muscle man devotes all of his energy to fulfilling requests.

"Okay, I'll get it," said Filia. Still perched on my back, she carefully reached out and plucked the flower from the cliffside. It was a small flower with white petals, speckled with red spots. Today's request was to gather this flower.

"And that makes ten," announced Filia, carefully placing the flower in the bag of holding at her waist.

"Let's pick two or three more then before we get back down, just in case."

About five minutes later, we'd picked three extras, and we started making our way back down the cliff.

"You know, I simply must wonder why flowers would bloom in such an unpleasant, hard-to-reach place," said Filia.

"I suppose you've got a point. They do look really beautiful, though..."

"Oh? When did you start talking about *me*?"

"I'm not talkin' about you at all, I'm talkin' about the flowers!"

Going back and forth like that, we made our way down the cliff face. Filia hopped off of my back, patted herself down, and sent a light cloud of dust fluttering around her in the process.

"Filia, could you check again and make sure that the petals are okay? Just in case?"

"One of the flowers is withered, but the rest are fine." She held the withered flower up to me. It had been blooming so vivaciously before, but now it was black and shriveled.

"Wow, I can't believe it would wither just like that after such a tiny shock. What a weak plant!"

At first, Filia had approached the flowers while floating with her wind magic, but the flowers had withered when touched by the swirling winds. That's why Filia and I hadn't had any other option except for me to carry her on my back, which had kept the plants from being disturbed.

"You were going at it too hard, Yuri. Why, you practically picked them to death!" said Filia, putting her hand over her mouth and giggling.

C'mon, that wasn't fair! What was wrong with a little effort? It wasn't *my* fault that the flowers had been so freaked out by my mighty presence! Ah, well... Climbing a cliff with just one hand had been a good workout, so it was fine.

"At any rate, we're done with this request. Let's head back to Jeepupp."

After we'd left the elf village, all sorts of stuff had happened. We'd ended up moving our home base from Mussen Morgeth to a city called Jeepupp. Yep, our adventures were far from over.

Chapter 1: Life in a New Land

JEPUUPP WASN'T A WEIRD CITY or anything. They were really big on agriculture around the city's outskirts, which were surrounded by fields. But the area near the inn that we stayed at was just as developed as any other town. Sure, nothing about the cityscape really grabbed your attention and stuck in your memory, but that was fine by me. I'd rather have a normal, boring city over some kinda weirdo metropolis built to have an impact on people, the kind with bizarre-looking streets or whatever.

Anyway, after we reported to the guild and informed them that we'd completed the request, we headed back out onto the nice, well-built roads, and soon, we arrived at the inn.

Now, as far as inns were concerned, they were basically all the same, and it really shouldn't have made much difference where we stayed. But I hadn't gotten used to this one yet. I glanced over at the two beds in our room, which were placed side by side. Those two beds were a big part of why I was still finding my footing. Now that we had plenty of money, we didn't have to skimp out on lodgings anymore. That meant we could just rent a normal room like normal people, but...

Well, I was sure we had been assigned to a room that was considered normal for a pair of adventurers.

Anyway, no matter how normal all of this was, sleeping next to another person wasn't something I could get used to overnight. At least Filia seemed to be in a good mood about it.

"At last, I don't have to feel guilty that I'm the only one sleeping in the bed!"

"Doesn't it feel embarrassing if we like, sleep next to one another?" I asked...or, uh, I wanted to. But she'd probably reply with "Oh, it's *embarrassing*, huh?" and it would have been a whole *thing*. I bit my tongue and ignored the Filia in my head who was teasing me about it pretty much nonstop.

Well, whatever. I got down on the floor and sat cross-legged. "Ah,

another long day! I'm exhausted."

Filia practically floated over into the bathroom and changed into her pajamas in an instant with her Mage Hand spell. Then she stepped back out and plopped down on the bed. "We really worked hard again today."

You could see her white midriff peeking through the gap between her pink pajamas. The incredible beauty of her waist alone would have been enough to entice men from all over the world—not that Filia seemed to notice. She could be so careless about that kind of thing.

I supposed that if you were in the middle of battle or carrying out a request, you couldn't really pay much attention to how you looked, but she didn't even seem to care about it when things were normal and peaceful! Seriously, how could I not notice that cute tummy?

"Yeah, you really did work hard. Want something to drink?" Being the gentle muscle man that I was, I averted my eyes and decided to make us some refreshments.

"How unusually thoughtful of you, Yuri. Okay, I believe I shall have...a milk tea, please."

"Okay, the 'unusually' part was a little uncalled for. I'm a gentle muscle man, after all, and we *have* been together for a while now," I replied, heading toward the kitchen as I spoke. I got out the tea leaves to make milk tea. Except...hold on. She wanted tea, sure, but I had no clue how *strong* she liked her tea. "Hey, Filia?"

"What is it?"

"Which do you like better? Strong and deep or light and breezy? I don't know how casual you are about these kinda things, so..."

"If I'm going to be together with anyone, I'd prefer it to be a strong, deep sort of connection."

"Uhh—what the heck are you talkin' about?!" I had absolutely no idea what to do with that, so I just went ahead and guessed with the tea. After making my own drink as well. "Here ya go."

"Thank you very much!" Filia bowed her head in thanks and took the cup from me. I sat down on the bed next to her and took a sip of my own drink.

Yep, it was revolting as always. I let out a sigh and then shifted my gaze over toward Filia, noticing that she was staring at my cup.

“Uh...what is it, Filia?”

“You’ve been drinking that creepy purple stuff pretty often lately, Yuri.” She leaned closer to my cup.

I took the opportunity to move my cup closer to her face at the same time. Near to it now, she caught a light whiff of its scent, and her face contorted with disgust. “Revolting! S-such a dreadful smell, isn’t it? And what’s that odd bubbling foam on top? What in the world are you drinking?”

“Oh, this? It’s poison.”

“You’re drinking poison?!” she cried in horror.

What? What was she mad about? “Yeah, it’s just poison, ya know? Oh, don’t worry, Filia—I’m only drinking three times the lethal dose.”

“*Only* three times? Yuri, I don’t think that word means what you think it means. Why are you even drinking something like that in the first place?!” She sighed heavily. “Let me guess: You’re about to tell me that you’re drinking poison for...internal organ training or something. Am I right?”

Oho! I was quite impressed with my pajama-clad companion. “That’s correct. I’ll give ya one point.”

“What kind of point?”

“Muscle Points! Every point you get enlarges your muscles.” I released the muscles just in my right arm, showing off just how developed they were. Check out these bulgin’ babies! I let out a gasp of admiration. What *is* it about muscles that makes them so beautiful? I mean, who in the world wouldn’t start hoarding Muscle Points then and there?

“I think I’ll pass, thank you!” she huffed.

Well, I supposed there was someone out there.

Jeez, was I the crazy one here? Who wouldn’t want *this*?

“Seriously, Yuri, are you trying to kill yourself?” she asked, climbing out of bed and standing in the space between hers and mine. She bent down and looked me straight in the eyes, utterly serious. I could see my own face reflected in those silver eyes of hers.

As serious as she was, there was only one answer I could give: “I’m drinking it because I don’t want to die.”

There was no room for cowardice when you fought with your life on the line. An enemy could at any time try to poison you. In fact, Bezegamoth *had* used poison in our fight, come to think of it. So, for the sake of survival, I had to get my body used to poison by exposing myself to it daily.

Filia looked unconvinced. Her cheeks twitched. “You’re drinking poison because you don’t want to die. Yuri, do you know how *completely insane* that sounds?”

“Hm? No, not especially, unless...oh, is that a riddle? Oh ho ho... you’ve got some pluck, challenging an intellectual muscle man like myself! Bring it!”

(A true intellectual muscle man, you see, is quite good at riddles.)

“We’re talking the same language, right? Are we not? Because it feels like we’re not...” Filia sighed deeply and let out one of the most impressive head shakes I’ve ever seen from her. But I really had no idea what she was even getting at.

The next day, sunlight poured into the room through the curtains.

“Nine-thousand nine-hundred and ninety. Nine-thousand nine-hundred and ninety-one. Nine-thousand nine-hundred and ninety-two...”

Only the sound of my breathing disturbed the silence of the inn. In the middle of my light workout—just doing push-ups from a handstand position—I casually glanced at the clock. It was about the time Filia usually woke up.

“Nine-thousand nine-hundred ninety-nine, ten-thousand...whew.”

After ending my early morning muscle training regimen with a strong finish, I headed over to the bath to wash off my sweat. By the time I got out, Filia was already awake.

“Good morning, Yuri!” Filia, with her long, shiny, silver hair, looked intently at me with her large eyes. I was a little bit surprised to see her looking so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this early; she wasn’t much of a morning person, often nodding back off to sleep right after getting up. It was a bit of a surprise for her to greet me so energetically.

“Oh, g’morning. Did something good happen or something?”

Filia blushed, looking ecstatic. She went into the kitchen and came back out with some strawberries. "I'm going to eat the strawberries we bought yesterday. Who *wouldn't* be excited about that? Tee hee hee!"

Delighted, she poked and rubbed the strawberries with her fingers. Oh yeah, we *had* bought those yesterday, hadn't we?

"You really do love a good strawberry, huh? Didn't your folks show me that picture of you at their house? What was it they said, that you wanted to be a strawberry when you were little?"

"J-just forget about such foolish things! I was little, it was a cute dream..." Maybe she was feeling self-conscious about it, because Filia flushed red and turned away from me.

"I just thought it was adorable, that's all. I mean, to think that there was a time when even *you* were so sweet, huh?"

"Excuse me? I'm still sweet today, thank you very much! Are you trying to make me mad?" Filia glared at me, her hands on her hips.

Oops. Maybe I'd gone a little too far with that. A true gentle muscle man makes up for such mistakes. "Sorry, sorry! You're sweet today too."

"He he he..."

"What's with you all of the sudden?"

"You complimented me so suddenly, I didn't know how to reply, so...I just laughed."

What was that supposed to mean?

"What should I do, Yuri?" she asked.

"Turn into a strawberry?"

"You...you *are* making fun of me, aren't you?" Filia's cheeks were puffed up, but she didn't seem angry.

"Am not. There, there, cutie pie." I stroked her head and tousled her hair.

"You *absolutely* are!" Filia glared, her long silver hair now thoroughly ruffled.

I took my hands off the grumpy-looking Filia and pulled open the curtains in the room. "Anyway, get a load of this: Even if you're so full

of energy this morning, Filia, it looks like we're stuck with a rainy day."

In fact, the rain was just starting. Soon it fell harder and harder, and in almost no time at all, it turned into a violent downpour. And to think that just a little while ago, rays of sunshine had been pouring in through the window.

"Um. To be clear," said Filia apologetically, looking up at me, "this isn't my fault, okay?"

"I know."

We decided to have some breakfast and see if we could wait it out. But even after we'd finished eating, the rain didn't let up. I put my hand up on the window and looked outside.

"This really is dreadful weather, isn't it?" Filia lamented. "There I was, so excited about those strawberries, and now it's raining so hard that I don't even see the point of going outside. How depressing..."

"But when the weather's bad, that's exactly when you should be going outside to train, you know?" You can't always fight under ideal conditions, after all. Whether or not you've put in the daily training to handle that kind of stuff? That truth always comes out in actual combat.

"Sorry, but I just can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"Yuri, the truth is...I dissolve in water."

"What, are you made of paper or something?!" I snorted. She was lying so audaciously, but with such a meek expression on her face.

"Maybe I am, what of it? I want to rest. Let's just rest, okay? *Please* just let me *rest*."

"Okay, so now you're asking that I treat you like you're made of paper? Well, all right, if that's what you say, Filia. I guess we'll take today off. I suppose it's also important to explore your relationship with your partner in order to strengthen your bond."

By increasing the amount of trust you had in one another, you could fight even stronger opponents, which meant that I could become stronger too. That'd be a plus for me. Besides, if I pushed her too hard, then Filia might catch a cold like she had once before. It would have been wrong to put too much pressure on her.

It was always difficult for me to tell what Filia really wanted, but

she rarely ever outright said if she wanted to take a break. As her partner, the responsible thing to do was to at least listen to her requests once in a while.

At that, Filia hopped up and down happily. “I knew it, Yuri, you *do* understand what I’m saying! Muscles are simply the coolest!”

“Oh, yeah, speaking of which, how about it? Wanna touch ‘em?”

“Deepest apologies, Yuri, but it appears that I said that muscles were ‘cool.’ It was a bit of an overstatement, I’m afraid. From the bottom of my heart, I’m truly sorry for making a statement that is so thoroughly incompatible with reality.”

“No way, my muscles are unmistakably cool. Check it out!”

I released all of my muscles and showed them off to Filia. There was no such thing as a person who was completely ripped from birth—no, these bulging muscles were a symbol of my training. If you listened very carefully, you could even hear my muscles speaking to me. Give it a listen: *Thank you for training us, Yuri!*

Were there any words more beautiful? Of course not! Which was why I said back, “No, no, I should be the one thanking *you*. Thank you, muscles.”

Ahh! And would you look at that? Now those muscles were smiling...somehow. I had no idea where their mouth was, though.

I gently stroked my biceps, which had grown to be even thicker than a log, treating them with tender, loving care—

“Yuri. Yuuuuuuuri?” The voice was as clear and sharp as a bell. Oh, right...Filia.

“Oh, hey. When did you get here?”

“I’ve been here the whole time. Exactly how much daydreaming are you planning to do?”

I’d gotten sucked into my own little world before I even knew it. Hadn’t I originally released my muscles to show them off to Filia? But there I was, mesmerized by my own muscles in the blink of an eye. For crying out loud, how thoughtless was I?

“Well, whatever,” said Filia. “You know what, Yuri? Let’s play a game! A game!”

“A game?”

“Don’t you know any? Gimme something new, something original! I want to play something!” Filia grabbed onto my arm and gently rocked it back and forth.

I felt a little bad about how I’d just slipped into a daydream right in front of her, so I decided to go along with her. But still, a game, huh? I’d lived alone in the woods for ages, so I didn’t know too many games for more than one person.

I nodded to myself. “Hm, okay. Yeah, there is one game that I’ve been thinking about.”

There was this game I’d come up with when I was a kid, but it was a competitive one. Needless to say, I’d never had a chance to play it back then, but now Filia was here!

“The fact that *you* came up with it,” said Filia, “is terribly worrisome, but I suppose I can at least listen to your explanation.”

Jeez, did Filia have to have so little confidence in me? Well, no matter. If I told her what the game was about, her confidence levels would rise for sure!

I gave her a broad grin and a thumbs-up. “Okay, the game I came up with is called ‘Power of the Fist.’”

“Denied.”

“Hey!” I hadn’t even said what it was about yet!

“The name speaks for itself; it sounds like a hobby for cavemen! I suppose it’s the kind of game where people just punch each other and the one who knocks the other down wins. Am I wrong?” Filia asked.

“Look, it’s way more complex than that. Just hear me out!”

“Okay, I’ll listen, but...” Reluctantly, Filia went silent.

For crying out loud, I was an intellectual muscle man! No way a game by *me* could be so simple. “Okay, listen up: first, we gotta get the cards.”

“Ah, so it’s a card game? That’s...a relief.”

What was that supposed to mean? She could be so vague sometimes. “Anyway, you shuffle a bunch of cards and place them between the two players. Then each player takes turns drawing five cards.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Next step, you check those numbers on your cards. You keep the card with the lowest in your hand and return all of the other cards to the deck.”

Filia raised her small hand. “What if you have multiple cards with the same lowest value? A two of spades and a two of hearts, for instance.”

Hmm. A good question. More importantly, it was encouraging that she was taking this seriously and listening along, even if she had questions. “In that case, you can just keep whichever card you like more. Now, finally, we get to the next phase—and this is what the ‘Power of the Fist’ is really about!”

“So, at last, the game’s about to begin,” said Filia, her silver hair hanging over her ears. “What then?”

“Then you each throw all your cards away and start punchin’!” I exclaimed. “The one who knocks the other down wins!”

Filia’s eyes widened. “What?! That’s insane!”

“Huh? How so?”

“The punching, Yuri? That last part is *unhinged*! I mean, even if you reversed the order of the phases, don’t you think it’s weird? The previous steps in the game become completely meaningless!”

I sighed. Filia was gonna be Filia about it, huh? I had no choice: I’d just tell her as gently as possible, like I was explaining to a whiny kid throwing a tantrum. “All right, Filia, but think about it this way, you know? Meaning, absurdity...what’s the purpose of anything, you know? Like, why are we even born into this world?”

“You’re arguing for argument’s sake, and I am not interested in the least!”

“For me, there is a reason for my existence. I was born into this world to become stronger, to train. So that’s why, in Power of the Fist —”

“I’m not doing it. In the end, it’s just people beating each other up!”

“Filia, listen: That is...the Power of the Fist.”

“Power of the Fist, my foot! I will never, ever play a game of that sort!”

Dang. She was pretty firm about it. “Come on, no need to be a stick in the mud.”

“Okay, I am *not* a stick in the mud. The stick has left this dimension. I am the stick, your game is the mud, and I am soaring as far away from the mud as possible because I suspect that getting punched by you would make me *explode*. You would *explode* me, Yuri, and I am much too beautiful and pretty to die yet, thank you very much.”

In the end, my attempts at persuasion were in vain, and Filia didn’t play Power of the Fist with me. Unfortunate.

Chapter 2: Glasses are a Sign of Intellectualism

“**W**HAT DO YOU WANT to eat?” asked Filia.

“I’m fine with anything,” I replied.

“Okay. I’m not really hungry for anything, to be honest, so why don’t we just browse?”

I went with Filia over to the city’s main street to grab some grub. The streets of Jeepupp weren’t all that different from those of Mussen Morgeth, or at least, they didn’t look different. But the variety and quality of food here were both way higher in Jeepupp, thanks to its thriving agricultural industry.

We marched through the shopping district in search of ingredients for dinner. It was late in the afternoon, so the shopping district was just packed full of energy. The ratio of men to women was about three to four—no, about twenty-nine to forty. After sensing every presence

in the shopping district, I detected an accurate headcount ratio. Every second is a gift, and you can’t waste it by not training!

“Looking rather intense, Yuri.”

“It was twenty-nine to forty, Filia.”

“I see. Marvelous.”

Totally dismissed!

Anyway, it was now time to look for ingredients in earnest. I found one potential option right away.

“Hey, how about this? A pigorscow?”

A pigorscow was a monster with the snout of a pig, the body of a cow, and the “neigh!” of a horse.

One pigorscow really covered your bases. Depending on which part you ate, it could taste like pork, beef, or even chicken. Weirdly enough, not a single slice of pigorscow tasted like horse. Anyway, it was a monster known mostly for being delicious. It was a bit pricey, but that didn’t really matter for us. We hardly ever spent money on anything

besides food, so we were loaded.

“That sounds good,” said Filia with a nod. “Shall we have hamburgers today?”

“Fine by me! So that’s our main dish—let’s look at some sides.”

Off we went to continue our shopping.

From there, we headed home, but things went a little different that day. We were taking a different route, mostly because of the four slips of paper that Filia was lightly flapping in her hand. “They have lottery drawings here, hmm?”

After we’d finished shopping, we’d drawn a lottery ticket, and since the ticket was valid for today only, we headed in the opposite direction of the inn, right to the lottery drawing.

“This is kind of fun, isn’t it?” Filia beamed. “We didn’t have anything like this in the village. It’s rather exciting!” She flapped the lottery tickets delightedly.

“So are you going to draw them all?”

“Huh? Is that really okay?” Her eyes lit up, and so—of course—all the guys walking past us started giving her puppy-dog looks. Argh. Yeah, Filia was cute and all, but they really needed to face forward when they were walking.

“Hm...” Filia was making some kind of humming sound. Her soft hand on her chin, she let out another anxious hum, as if she were deep in thought. What on earth was going on with her? Just as I was about to ask, Filia looked up at me excitedly. “Okay, we’ll each do half. It’ll be more fun that way!” she said with a wide smile.

That took me by surprise. Wow, was she really a good person after all? I took two of the lottery slips from her. “You know, you really are nice sometimes.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Nice? Oh, I think maybe you’re misunderstanding something. I just can’t wait to see you draw a losing roll, Yuri, you know?”

Nope, never mind! What a jerk! The smile on Filia’s face had transformed from pure innocence into purest darkness—into utterly wicked black-hearted monstrosity! What a fool I was, thinking that she was a good person.

“Well, whatever. I’m going to draw the top prize!” I declared.

“You got awful motivated all of a sudden.”

“If I’m gonna do something, I do it with all I’ve got. That’s only natural.” No way was I gonna draw a loss! Never!

After a few minutes of walking, we saw a red-and-white tent. A few people were queued up in front of it, and the person at the far end in the tent was spinning a lottery wheel, which made a clacking sound as it turned.

“It looks like this is where they’re holding the lottery drawing,” said Filia.

“Let’s hurry and get in line.”

We queued up at the back of the line and waited for our turn to draw, and it wasn’t long at all before we were up. I was the first one of us to go. I glanced over at the products on display at the back of the tent. You got first prize if the light yellow-colored ball came up, which won you a gift certificate usable anywhere in Jeppupp.

To be blunt, we didn’t really need it. We already had plenty of money, after all. But it was the top prize, so I still had to shoot for it.

“Hm...” I had two chances, and I was gonna use one of those chances to win the first prize! I took a deep breath, then turned the brown lottery wheel in front of me. The wooden wheel made a rattling sound as it spun around, and...

It spat out a brown ball from the front.

“All right, brown gets you a participation prize! Here’s your shoelace, sir!” The young woman operating the lottery game handed me a thin string, the same color as the brown ball. Since it was the participation prize, I guess that counted as a loss. To be honest, I didn’t even need any shoelaces at the moment.

“Pffftt...!” Filia cackled behind me. She was really having a ball with this. Ugh, couldn’t she shut up? Why couldn’t she—no, wait! I had to concentrate! Messing with my nerves was all just part of her plan. I couldn’t be fooled. *Don’t be fooled, Yuri!*

I calmed myself and grabbed the handle of the lottery wheel once more. This was my last chance. I was going to win first prize, no matter what. “Come on, light yellow! Come on, light yellow!”

“*Light* yellow? I don’t know about light, but it’s going to be *something*. Speaking of which, I’d rather have a strong, deep connection in a relationship over something light.”

“You already told me that earlier! Come on, light yellow!” I turned the lottery wheel, it spun along with merry little clacks, aaaaaand...

Out popped a brown ball. Dang. I’d drawn another loser.

“Oh...hm?” No, wait a minute. It was brown-*ish*, sure, but this color of this ball was subtly different from the one before. It was a smidge darker than light brown. Could this one be a winner?! Even if it wasn’t first prize, what if it was second or third—

“Dark brown gets you a participation prize. Here you go! A shoelace!” said the young woman cheerfully, placing another shoelace in my hands. It was slightly darker in color than the shoelace from before.

“Um...does there really need to be a color variant?” I asked.

“We prepared multiple colors for our customers’ enjoyment!” said the woman, smiling brightly. Well, she said it so cheerfully, so I couldn’t really fault her over the issue. We live in a society, after all... even if I *had* won the participation prize twice in a row.

“That’s really unfortunate, isn’t it, Yuri? Eh he he!” Filia lightly smacked me on the shoulder, unable to hold back her laughter.

“Grr...” But what could I even say? The results spoke for themselves.

“All right, Yuri, please watch carefully: the transcendently beautiful lottery elf Filia shall demonstrate what playing the lottery is *supposed* to be like.”

“I thought you said that you’ve never done this before?” Also, what the heck was a lottery elf?

Filia just wagged a finger at me. “Tsk tsK tsK! I don’t need to have experience to win. I am, after all, a woman beloved by the heavens.” Without hesitation, she began to turn the wheel.

Clack, clack, clack, and...

“Ah...”

The ball was brown. Yep, it was brown no matter how long you

squinted at it. "Looks like you and I are the same, huh?"

"Pl-please wait! It's a fairly different color, though! Look, isn't it a little lighter?!"

Well, it was a *bit* lighter than the brown balls I'd gotten.

"I-I'm sure that the light yellow just got dirty!" said Filia desperately. "Which means that I won first place. Which means, obviously, that—"

"Light brown gets you a participation prize. Here you go! A shoelace!" said the young woman, heartlessly cutting Filia off.

Trembling, Filia took the shoelace. "Are all the brown balls losers or something?!"

"Yep! All the brown balls are losers!"

"No way..." Filia hung her head, but it wasn't like anything was going to change. She had one more shot, one more opportunity.

"Pull a loser...pull a loser..."

"Yuri? What are you whispering about? You *want* me to draw a loser?"

"That'll make us members of the same club. The League of Losers."

"I would never join a league with a name like that!" Filia grabbed the handle of the lottery wheel. "Please! Come on, light yellow!"

Then she spun the lottery wheel. The lottery wheel clacked along as it spun, and out popped one ball.

"Ah!" It was... a light yellow. "Yay! I did it, Yuri!"

"Hey, that's amazing, Filia!"

Without thinking, we joined hands and rejoiced. The woman in charge of the lottery game smiled at us and announced, "The lemon-colored ball is the sixth-place prize. Here you go! Some lens-less glasses!"

Filia blinked. "Huh?"

Apparently, the ball was lemon-colored, not light yellow. So Filia had won a pair of glasses without lenses, and that was that.

"It's too bad you didn't get first prize, but it's something," I said to Filia, trying to compliment her on our way back to the inn. She'd gotten

closer to winning than me, after all.

Filia was holding the black glasses in her hand...the...black glasses? Wait a minute, why were the frames black instead of lemon-colored?

"I suppose that I might actually have a use for this," said Filia, "so I'm glad things worked out this way."

"That so?"

Filia didn't seem particularly disappointed at all that she hadn't won first prize. I supposed the glasses might've been a better prize after all, considering that they could be used as a fashion accessory.

"I'll try them on right away after we get back to the inn. I'll let you try them too, Yuri."

"Really? Thanks."

"Although I'm certain they won't suit you at all. Tee hee!"

"You always gotta fit in a little barb at the end, huh?"

Once we got back to the inn, we put down our prizes, sat down on our respective beds, and chatted away.

Filia seemed to be in good spirits. "In the end, I only won the sixth-place prize. But *you* only got two shoelaces, so I guess this makes me the beautiful lottery champion!" Filia sang.

"Yeah, nothin' I can say to that. I lost fair and square." And I'd gotten the participation prize twice in a row, of all things. So disappointing!

Filia smirked. "No problemo, my good bro."

"Uh. What was *that*?"

"I thought I'd try acting like a big wig. You know, a sort of upper-crust voice?" said Filia, looking very serious. Was that how she thought they sounded?

"Your lack of imagination is showing," I told her.

"L-Lacking in the breast department? Me? Why, I never!"

"Hold on, you know that's not what I said at all!"

Filia crossed her arms in front of her chest for emphasis and gave me a look of disgust, like I was some kinda perv. But she was the one who'd brought it up, hadn't she?

“C’mon, Filia. I’d never say something like that.”

“I-I suppose that’s true...I’m sorry. I lost my head a little bit there.”

“I’m glad you understand that. Anyway, how about those glasses? You’re gonna try ’em on, right?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right! Glasses time!”

We’d managed to get to the main topic...somehow. I let out a deep sigh. Thank goodness things hadn’t gotten even more complicated.

Filia handed me the glasses. “I’ll make an exception and let you wear them, Yuri. Think of it as my apology for what happened before. This makes us even.”

“All right.” It wasn’t like I was particularly worried about all that, but I wasn’t about to turn down the opportunity. I took the black lens-less glasses from Filia. The simple oval-shaped frames gave me the look of an intellectual.

Oho...that’s right, baby. I started admiring the look of Glasses Yuri. Maybe these would help me fulfill my secret ambition...my ambition to become an intellectual-type character!

“I am an intellectual muscle man, but I just can’t seem to convey my sheer intellectualism to the people. Once I put on these glasses, I’ll finally become an intellectual-type character!”

“I’m sorry, Yuri, but the very fact that you said that goes to show that you’re no intellectual.”

“Ah! You say that, Filia, but I haven’t even put them on yet. You’re gonna eat your words!” I put the glasses on and turned to look at Filia. “So, what do you think? Intellectual-lookin’, right? I totally look like an intellectual?”

Filia slowly tilted her head. “Hm? It’s... not... great? Subtle, for sure, but...hm. I think they don’t quite suit you.”

They didn’t suit me, huh?

I checked myself out in the mirror, but—to be perfectly frank—I had no idea whether they actually looked good on me or not. But if Filia said they weren’t a great look on me, she was probably right. I’d have to put my intellectual-in-glasses plans on hold. Besides, I didn’t want to rely on glasses to look the part, you know?

No, I needed to convey intellectualism to others around me based on the impression they got from *me*, not a pair of glasses. As I thought about that, I realized something.

“Hey, Filia. Aren’t these glasses kinda, uh, really cheap?”

“They are certainly quite thin, but, you know, glasses are surprisingly durable.”

“That’s not what I mean though. They’re really light.”

“Technology these days is amazing. You don’t even feel like you’re wearing them,” Filia declared casually.

At that moment, inspiration hit. I snapped my fingers. “Eureka!”

“You’re eek-who?” Filia gave me a puzzled look.

I’d just have to explain my revolutionary idea to her, then. “If you’re going to wear glasses, I think it would be way more fun if they were as heavy as a rock. You know, for training!”

“You have such a *particular* idea of fun.”

My idea was immediately rejected, but—no, I had to be onto something, right? “But it’s still good to have some kind of impact, you know? Oh! How about something like a function where it just suddenly electrocutes your entire body without any warning? Now that’s what I call impact! Thrilling impact!”

“No one would want that kind of impact, and glasses don’t need to be thrilling.”

Glasses didn’t need to be thrilling, huh? Then why in the world did anyone wear them?

Filia sighed. “Yuri, you really are a muscle-brained lunk through and through, aren’t you?”

“Aw, come on, Filia, you’ll make me blush.”

“Yuri, I want you to please understand what I’m doing here. I’m being disparaging.”

“Disparaging how?”

“I feel like I could call you anything, and you’d be happy as long as it had the word ‘muscle’ in it somewhere.”

“Well, I can’t help it if that makes me happy. I mean, check out these muscles, right? He he...”

“Whoa...” Upon seeing me vacantly gazing at my own muscles, a completely spellbound look in my eyes, Filia crossed her arms like she was hugging herself tight.

“Okay, you’re making that face at me right now, but what goes through your head when you’re looking at yourself in the mirror?”

“Something like...‘The world is mine!’ Or, hm, more specifically, I think about how I’m just so cute that I could eat myself up! He he he...”

“Whoa...” What was her deal?! Was she crazy or something? I put a little distance between myself and Filia as she laughed.

A few minutes later, I’d finished trying on the glasses and it was time to hand them back to Filia.

Glasses in hand, she looked oddly focused and unleashed a rather disconcerting chuckle. “Tee hee. At last, I, the star performer, shall wear the glasses!”

Before I even realized it, I’d been reduced to the opening act. I guessed that made sense, if we were going by looks. I’m not trying to be self-deprecating here—Filia is really just way too beautiful. Nothing you can do about that.

Filia had her back turned to me, so I couldn’t see her face. “Drr-drr-drr-drr!” She suddenly started making some kinda mysterious sound. Was she trying to put some kind of curse on me or something? Wait, no, maybe it was an attempt at a drumroll sound? With a bright “Dun-dun!” she whirled around to face me.

“So, what do you think? Do they look good on me?”



“I dunno. They kinda suit you. I think? I mean, you already look pretty smart,” I said. If you looked at Filia’s face alone, she gave the impression of cool and intelligent beauty.

But that impression was even further enhanced by the black lensless glasses. Although she hadn’t changed on the inside, she looked the part of a composed, quiet, mature woman. You could just picture her reading an anthology of poetry in the library, lit by the sunlight filtering through the trees outside.

She didn’t remotely look like the kind of person who would say something like, “Drr-drr-drr-drr, dun-dun!” or anything.

Filia must’ve been pretty pleased to hear it, because she pushed the glasses up on her face, looking ecstatic. “Tee hee. I suppose I *am* quite sagacious.”

“Nah. I’m just saying that you look smart, is all. In reality, well... you’re more...you know.”

“I’m more what?! What do I know?!”

“Well, *you know*, I mean...nah, I feel sorry for you. I’m not gonna say it.” I didn’t want to fool around and hurt Filia or anything, but it seemed like my kindness had backfired.

Filia leaned over her bed. “You’re usually oh-so-straightforward and outspoken, so why is it that Mr. Delicacy only says hello at times like this, hmm? It’s *quite* the coincidence, so of course I’m going to be curious.”

“Mr. Delicacy says hello”? What does that mean?”

“Please don’t dodge the question.”

Huh? Was I the bad guy here?

“Come on, won’t you come out and say it? If you say it, it’ll make things better. Okay?” said Filia, moving over onto my bed and sitting down, tugging on my sleeves.

If she said she wanted to hear it that badly, it had to be fine. Right? “Okay, I’ll come out and say it, but it might hurt your feelings. Okay?”

“I can handle it! I will refute your every argument brilliantly, and I will demonstrate to you that I, the transcendently beautiful elf, am absolutely and positively perfect, Yuri,” said Filia, putting her hands on

her thin waist and sticking her chest out confidently.

“It’s not really that big a deal. It’s just, well, there are maybe two or three things that kinda make me not so sure about, uh. The word sagacious. As it applies to you?”

“Yes, yes, and what would those be? Can you give me citations? If you think that I, Filia, renowned for my complete perfection at all times, in all places, have any flaws, then let’s hear them!”

I took a deep breath. “You...love yourself way too much.”

“Hm.”

“You get carried away as soon as someone praises you.”

“Well, that’s...”

“And we first met because you got lost in the forest, Filia.”

“Okay, okay! Jeez, that’s enough.” Filia plopped down on my bed and hid her face with a pillow. “Ugh...” Then she started sobbing and sniffing.

“Told ya so.”

“So hurtful...” Filia sniffed and, with her face still buried into the pillow, kicked her legs around.

“But the glasses look good on you. That’s true.”

Filia turned to look toward me, her eyes glassy. The silver hue of her eyes glittered and sparkled in the light. “R-really? You’re not making fun of me again?”

“Come on, think about it. Have I ever made fun of you before?”

At that, Filia looked up and then started recalling past incidents, counting them on her fingers. “Yeah,” she said, “a few times.”

Okay, yeah, I’d made fun of her a lot. I’d just been trying to find something nice to say, but this conversation was going bad fast. “W-well, putting aside the whole making fun of you thing...I really do think the glasses look good on you. You know, they kinda, you know...you look fashionable. Maybe even smooth.”

I’d answered like a true intellectual muscle man, putting my extensive vocabulary to good use to praise her. To be specific, I’d pushed on ahead with *smooth*. But regrettably, I’d lived on my own for a long time, so complimenting others wasn’t my strong suit. Maybe I’d

made a mistake. Maybe I'd—

“Hm. He he.”

Nope, it seemed like her mood had already improved. Jeez, flattery really did do wonders for her. Did that make her less difficult? Or more?

“Well, Yuri, that's to be expected from yours truly!” Filia, completely recovered, now sat next to me, shoulder to shoulder.

“Yep, that's just what I'd expect from you, Filia.” I meant her quick recovery, of course.

“Huh? What was that?” asked Filia.

“Oh, that's just what I'd expect from you, Filia.”

“He he! I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you. One more time, please?”

“That's just...what I'd expect from you, Filia?”

“Bah ha ha! Come on, no need to butter me up! You're embarrassing me!”

“You've got an interesting way of enjoying life, huh?”

As Filia lightly smacked the bed, hiding her embarrassment, I shot her a teasing look.

Chapter 3:

A Duel with a Red Girl

WE WERE HEADED to the guild; we'd finished a request, so it was time to alert somebody.

"Thank you for your hard work. The request is complete."

"Thanks."

That was that, and we were about to head on back to the inn when we ran into *her*.

A new adventurer stepped into the guild. She had long ruby-red hair, done up in twin tails. Her eyes were narrow and almond-shaped, and they shone with a fierce, unyielding spirit.

From head to toe, her small body was clothed in red. She wore a sleeveless red shirt with strings around her shoulders and red shorts, with her thighs boldly left exposed. She was about one head shorter than Filia, who was about five and a half feet, which left the girl at *almost* five even. This young woman looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old, based on her appearance.

As soon as the girl came into the guild, people started talking.

"Hey, isn't she..."

"Yeah, she's the one they talk about..."

Apparently, she was a pretty famous adventurer, so she attracted a lot of attention. Ignoring those around her, she briskly walked up to the counter.

Just as I was about to leave the guild, I collided into the girl's shoulder. "Oops!"

The impact of the collision was completely different for her than it was for me. Even without releasing my well-trained muscles, I stood about a foot taller than this slender young girl, give or take. In order to help the girl and stop her from falling back on her backside, I released my muscles and put my arm around her back. It was a close call, but I successfully kept her from falling.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” I said. “Are you hurt?”

The girl turned toward me, lightly rubbing her shoulder. “Ow... oh, no, no, it’s okay. I was the one who wasn’t paying enough attention. Thank you for stopping me from falllllyahhhh?! Monsterrrr!”

The girl’s high-pitched scream echoed throughout the guild.

I slid into a fighting stance and scanned around the area. “Monster?! Where? I wanna fight it!”

“You! You’re the monster! What is *up* with your body?! You were totally normal until just a minute ago!” she stammered.

She thought I was the monster? How disappointing. What was it about me that made people think I was a monster in the first place? I mean, I’d instantly grown a head taller, and my body was now covered with thick muscle armor because I’d released my muscles. But that couldn’t be it, right?

“No,” said Filia, standing beside me, “that sounds about right.”

Filia must’ve read my mind again or something. She’d said something out loud too, but it wasn’t pleasant and I just decided to ignore it. And ignore it I did indeed, quite magnificently!

More importantly, I needed to clear up the red girl’s misunderstanding. She was still trembling, shaking her small head in my arms.

“I’m not a monster,” I explained. “This is muscle. I got like this after training.”

“That’s not what training does! Are you crazy or something?!” she shouted.

Uh, no? It was just what happened if you trained enough, actually? And hey, I wasn’t crazy! “I’m an intellectual muscle man. Anyway, uh...if you’ve got enough energy to yelp like that, I don’t gotta worry about you being hurt or anything. I’m gonna let you go now, okay?”

“W-wait a minute...” Just as I was about to pull my arm back, she suddenly started panicking, like she was flustered about something. But why? She didn’t seem to even like me, and she couldn’t be injured with the way she was acting.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

The girl gave my face a fleeting glance, then she looked from side to side as if she was feeling awkward about something. Her gaze bounced around the room. "I think you dislocated my back?" she said, looking down, her face going a little red.

A silence fell between us. The adventurers who'd been silently watching it all reacted at once to those words.

"Hey, did she just say that her back was dislocated?"

"Pfft. So much for 'Flame Princess' Ashley, huh?"

"Guess she's actually pretty weak."

"Well, come on, don't say that. I mean, she's a thirteen-year-old kid."

"C'mon, you've always been the one to make fun of her the most!"

"Bwa ha ha ha ha!"

The adventurers' scornful laughter filled the guild. The girl's face turned a deeper shade of red at their cruel jeering.

"It's probably better not to pay them any mind," said Filia gently. "Rubbish people say rubbish things." Then she used her recovery magic on the girl.

As soon as the girl's back was healed, she hopped out of my arms. "How dare you?" The girl looked pretty angry. Her face was bright red, and her small fists were shaking. Well, I supposed any girl her age would be mad if someone just told her to ignore people bad-mouthing her.

"You *cretin*!" the girl shouted, pointing her finger at me aggressively, like *kapow*! "How dare you humiliate me like this?"

Wait, *me*? "How is this my fault?"

"I'm not saying that you *did* anything. It just so happens that I don't like you! I'm challenging you to a duel!"

"Oh, a duel! Nice!" She seemed pretty strong, after all, even if I preferred to be the one doing the asking when it came to fighting strong people.

The word "duel" had a really nice ring to it too. There's something about it that just excites people.

When Ashley heard my reply, she narrowed her eyes at me and let

out a surprised “Hmm! Confident, aren’t you? I guess you don’t know who you’re talking to. I am Ashley, the Flame Princess!”

The way that she touched her lips at that last part, she was positively oozing appeal. Didn’t really seem to be a thirteen-year-old kind of thing to do.

“Nope, don’t know anything about that at all. Who is she?”

I clearly saw a vein bulge on the girl’s forehead for an instant. The appeal from before was nowhere to be seen now. The way she gestured now, all huffy and angry, definitely seemed a lot more appropriate for a girl her age.

“What do you mean, *who*?!” she demanded. “I just told you my name, didn’t I?!”

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

“Huh?! Stop messing with me!”

I sighed. “For crying out loud...”

The girl jabbed her finger at me once again. “My name is Ashley Arisietta. I’m a genius magician, and the youngest person ever to achieve S-Rank!”

To think that she was so polite enough to introduce herself a second time. This kid was serious.

More importantly...

“Oh, S-Rank? That’s awesome! You’re so strong, I can’t believe it! I’m so happy! My name’s Yuri, so...all right! Let’s fight!”

And that’s how I ended up fighting the S-Ranked adventurer, Ashley. I’d never faced any S-Rank anything before, so I was raring to go!

We’d agreed to a duel, so Ashley, Filia, and I went out into the wide-open wilderness. Since it was almost dusk, we couldn’t see any other people in the area.

The way Ashley boldly stood her ground, her long red hair swaying in the blowing wind, showed that she was no ordinary

adventurer. Even in my darkening field of vision, she shone a brilliant red.

“I’ll give you credit for not running away, at least. But now, Yuri, I’m going to show you what happens when you pick a fight with me.”

“But you were the one who challenged me to a duel.”

“Err. Wh-who cares about the trivial details?!”

“Yeah, true! Long as I can fight, it’s all fine by me.” I honestly didn’t care who started the fight. The important part was that I could give it my all.

“Yuri,” said Filia, “please don’t overdo it.” She’d really come all this way to make sure I was careful...

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

Come on, no matter how much Filia worried, she had to know I wasn’t gonna kill anybody or anything. This was a duel, after all. But a certain someone picked up on that part of the conversation and really lost it.

“What?” Ashley snapped. “You there! The one standing next to him. You think that I’m going to lose?!”

“N-no,” said Filia, “that’s not what I’m—”

“Ugh, you’re just like him! Two unpleasant peas in a pod.”

“N-no way,” Filia groaned. “To think that she’d lump me and Yuri in the same category...”

Wait, what? Shouldn’t Filia be happy to be in the same category as me? What was the big idea, dropping to her knees and hanging her head like that?

I took a deep breath. Let out a heavy sigh. “Okay, enough of this talking stuff. Let’s just start this thing.”

Seriously, I couldn’t take it anymore. I wasn’t gonna wait another second, not with such a great fight ahead!

“Fine by me. I’m going to blast you full of holes!” Flames flowed out of Ashley’s body as she spoke. Her magical energy just kept growing and growing as she took her combat stance.

The heat was so intense that I could feel it from about thirty feet away. “I’m getting real fired up!” I was shaking with joy as I took my

combat stance.

About ten minutes later, Ashley's breathing was getting a bit more ragged. Her body was covered in more than a few wounds, all of which were more than mere scrapes—she was bleeding from several places. However, although her body was covered in wounds, she looked pretty much good to go.

“Nice! More! Come at me more, bring it!” As for me, I was only slightly injured. I'd suffered a few burns here and there, but my breathing remained even.

“Grr...I'm not going to lose...! I...I'll win, I know it!”

“That's it! Don't give up! Come at me with all you got!”

Ashley unleashed her most powerful fire magic. The size and the power of her spell were nothing to sneeze at.

“If you're usin' fire magic,” I said, “then I'm gonna use this!”

Muscle magic. The strongest, best magic. The magic known only to those who trained their muscles with single-minded devotion. I used all the strength I could muster and launched my fist at the oncoming vortex of flames. There was a loud *fwoom*, and my fists caught fire. It wasn't from her flames, though. My fist had ignited the air.

“Hooaaah!” My fist perfectly split the oncoming vortex of flame in half. I closed right in on Ashley.



“Grr...” Ashley tried to resist, but the recoil from her most powerful magic made her a sitting duck. As she was totally defenseless, I brought my hand down in a karate chop motion, stopping just before hitting the back of Ashley’s neck.

“It’s over. I win.”

“Ah...” Ashley was completely stunned. She looked toward my hand near her neck, her eyes blank. I pulled my hand back away, relaxed my stance, and reverted back from my giant form (nearly seven feet) to my normal size.

“That was pretty fun! Wow, you’re really strong. Definitely S-Rank.”

“I... lost...?” she stammered.

“Let’s do this again, Ashley. My schedule’s open—we can do the day after tomorrow, tomorrow, or heck, even today!”

Honestly, this girl was crazy strong. Probably stronger than I’d been when I was thirteen years old. On top of that, this was only a duel. If this were a match where our lives were on the line, she probably would’ve been even stronger. Just the thought of it got my adrenaline pumping; my excitement kept growing nonstop!

But Ashley didn’t respond.

“Hey, Ashley? Did you hear what I said?” I tried asking her again, but still, no answer.

“Ashley, are you okay?” asked Filia, rushing over to her and casting recovery magic.

“What? Did she get a serious injury somewhere or somethin’?” We’d just been having a duel—there was no way I’d injured her so seriously that she couldn’t move...right?

“No, she doesn’t appear to be all that hurt—” Filia suddenly stopped. But why? I took a closer look...and saw Ashley bawling from her reddened eyes.

“Hrk, guh! Hic! I hate you! I really hate you!” And in a flash, not even healed, Ashley got up and booked it.

Filia and I were left just standing there in the wide-open wilderness. With nothing else to do, we walked back toward Jeepupp.

“It sounds like she hates you, Yuri.” Filia sighed. She looked

down. "She probably hates me too."

"Why?" I didn't understand why Ashley hated me. I hadn't done anything particularly bad to her or anything.

"Well, it would've been rude to read her mind, so I'm not entirely sure, but...frankly, I worried this might happen."

"Oh? Well, I'd like to hear why, if you don't mind."

"That girl... Ashley, she's an incredible prodigy. She's an S-Rank at age thirteen, the youngest person ever to reach that rank."

"Yeah, that's true." Being the youngest person ever meant that there was no precedent; she really was the first. No matter what field you're in, it's incredible to achieve the unprecedented.

"Because she's such a prodigy, she probably hasn't ever faced a real obstacle in her life before. And now that she *has* run into a wall, in the form of you, Yuri...you know what I'm getting at, right?"

"Hm? What do you mean?" I tilted my head. "Shouldn't someone be happy if they've never hit a wall before though?"

"Oh," said Filia, "so you're *that* kind of person."

Now that was a statement that I really didn't know how to interpret.

"I suppose that you might not understand even if I try to explain it to you, Yuri... Well, I suppose that it's just that not everyone has the same mentality as you do," said Filia, coming to a standstill.

I turned back to look at her, and she waved me off.

"I'm going to go look for Ashley," she said. "I'm a little worried."

"I see. Want me to have dinner ready for you?"

"No, I'm all right. Have a good night, okay?"

"Yeah, you too."

Filia and I parted ways, so I went back to Jeepupp by myself. I'd never been good at dealing with other people's feelings. If I tagged along, I knew I'd probably just cause even more trouble, so I figured that it'd be better to quietly head back to the inn and do some muscle training. I turned back around to look in Filia's direction one more time before heading back to the inn.

And...I actually don't know what happened next. That was

between Filia and Ashley.

Chapter 4: Secret Incident

“G_R...AHHH! I *lost*!”

A girl ran through the wide-open wilderness, trying desperately to get away from Jeepupp. Her red twin tails swayed as she ran. Her body was covered in wounds, and the impact of her every footfall caused her more pain. But the girl, injured as she was, kept running. She didn't have a goal. There wasn't any place she was going to. She was simply running.

Running to escape her own crushing weakness.

The girl's name was Ashley Arisietta. She was a genius magician, the youngest person ever to achieve S-Rank at the tender age of thirteen. You might think a girl like that had natural talent, but it wasn't true in this case. In order to make the most of one's talents, one must put in

the appropriate level of effort to match. Day after day, the girl had been giving it her all. Results had followed.

But this time was different. She'd met a huge wall, a wall so thick and so strong that she feared it was impossible to break through.

“I *lost*!”

Even though she was completely out of breath, Ashley gritted her teeth. This was a loss that she couldn't explain away...it was a total defeat. As Ashley continued to run, the forest came into view in front of her. The dense, overgrown trees almost looked like evil tentacles, denying entry to any adventurer.

The dense, blackish-green of the trees was so eerie that it left every passerby with an ominous sense of foreboding. Adventurers called it the Demon Forest. It was a dangerous area that adventurers below A-Rank were forbidden to enter.

“That's it! I'm going to completely annihilate the monsters there!”

Thus Ashley had decided. The fact that her body was still covered in wounds and the fact that she had almost completely exhausted her

magical energy in a duel no longer concerned her. She couldn't stay like this. She couldn't stay defeated. Because she was a prodigy. Because she *had* to be a prodigy. The obsessive thoughts clouded her mind, narrowed Ashley's field of vision, made reason impossible.

"Hello. Nice to see you again."

The voice rang like a bell; it echoed pleasantly in Ashley's ears. When she turned, she saw the partner of the man she'd just fought, the man called Yuri. And this was Filia, wasn't it? The elf wasn't out of breath at all, so she'd probably used wind magic to give chase.

Ashley glared at the beautiful silver-haired elf before her. "What, did you come to laugh at me?" The coldness of her words surprised even herself, though they came from her heart. "I just charged in, and I lost in a completely humiliating way. Funny, isn't it?" She sniffed. "There's no excuse for a loss like that."

The girl held back the waves of tears as best as she could despite her burning shame. But Filia just stood completely still, showing no signs that she was going to laugh at all.

"What's the matter?" Ashley barked. "Laugh!"

Filia's silver eyes shone even more mysteriously at night, after the setting of the sun. The shine in her eyes disappeared once, for only a moment, before lighting up once more. Ashley realized a moment later that Filia had just blinked.

"No," said Filia. "I genuinely thought that you were amazing. I could never, ever possibly challenge Yuri."

So...fine. Maybe the elf standing in front of her hadn't come to laugh at her, or to ridicule her. It was even more humiliating to be pitied by her enemy's ally.

"Are you making fun of me? What's the point of a fight if you lose? I have to win! I have to win, or there's no..." Ashley's voice was shaking. Was it out of anger or shame? Not even Ashley was certain.

"Believe that if you will, but I can't just leave you alone like this," said Filia. "You're going into the Demon Forest with such wounds, and...surely you understand that if you die, then there's nothing left. Don't you?"

That was a sound argument. It really was. Ashley could tell that Filia wasn't just showing her pity but was truly concerned for her well-

being. That didn't mean she could just back down now. She had to be a prodigy.

"Wh-why would I...why would I need to hear that from you?! I'm an S-Rank! Are *you* an S-Rank?!" shouted Ashley, her voice rising and falling, cracking and breaking as her emotions raged.

Sure, Ashley was lashing out. She knew that, even if she was angry with herself for it. But the thoughts swirling around inside her were so dark that she just couldn't stop them anymore.

"No, I'm an A—"

"Then keep your mouth shut!"

Even with her eyes all red, Ashley could tell that Filia's shoulders twitched. She had probably gone too far with that...no, she was sure of it. But the thirteen-year-old girl simply didn't have the words to apologize.

"It's my life," said Ashley. "And I can judge for myself what's dangerous for me."

The elf standing in front of her had already chipped away at her willpower to enter the Demon Forest. *After she goes home*, Ashley thought to herself, *I'll go home too*.

Even so, after everything Ashley had said, she was certain that the elf had seen through her too.

"I see...well, I *am* a lower rank than you, Ashley. I suppose my words might not be convincing." But this elf, this Filia, didn't stop. She kept trying to convince Ashley not to enter the forest. "I don't imagine that going up in rank comes that easily," Filia mumbled, her thoughts coming out in a whisper. "Um, Ashley?"

Their eyes met. Filia's silver eyes seemed to look straight through Ashley, freezing her on the spot. "Wh-what is it?" Ashley asked.

"Will you join me? Help me think of a way that I can convince you not to do this."

"Huh?!" Ashley stared. *What is she talking about? She wants me to figure out a way for her to convince me?*

"Please! I can't do it alone!"

"O-okay...?" Ashley had no idea how things had come to this, but now she had to help think of a way to...stop herself from going into the

forest. Even though, in truth, she no longer had any intention of doing so.

Both Filia and Ashley stood there before the Demon Forest, absorbed in their thoughts. However, they weren't coming up with any good ideas. Ashley couldn't even think straight anyway; she was too distracted with idle thoughts. One such thought: *Why am I doing this in the first place?!*

"Ah!" Filia shouted suddenly.

Ashley had hung her head, lost in thought, trying to concentrate. But she looked up at that, thinking that Filia had come with something clever. When their eyes met, Ashley saw that Filia had an entirely smug look on her face.

"I understand. All I have to do is beat Yuri," she announced.

Filia had offered yet another completely astounding answer. Deep down, Ashley had to admit that it was a little impressive. However, she soon realized that there was one big problem with Filia's idea.

"He'll go easy on you, won't he? I mean, you're his partner, right? It's not like anyone would really hit their partner with everything they've got." Yeah, nobody with any sense would really go all out on their partner.

To be honest, Ashley's assessment was an extremely reasonable one. However, they weren't talking about a normal person.

"Does he really look like the kind of guy who would go easy on someone?" asked Filia.

"I...guess he doesn't, no." That said it all, Ashley decided. That muscle monster she'd just fought absolutely wouldn't take it easy on someone just because they were his ally. "But what's in this for you?"

"Ah, um..." Filia, who'd been speaking so eloquently, suddenly started stammering.

Hmm... What was she scheming? Even though Ashley was the youngest person to have ever held S-Rank, she was still S-Rank. Sensing something was amiss, her brain kicked into high gear. She steeled herself to jump into battle at even a moment's notice as she studied Filia.

After squirming and struggling to come up with answers, a look dawned on Filia's face like she'd made up her mind. Her peach-colored

lips parted.

“I want you to be my f-friend,” said Filia. “Would that...be okay?”

The words that passed through Filia’s lips were not at all what Ashley had expected. She was caught completely off guard. Her mind stopped racing. She gave up on trying to come with a reply and fell silent.

The silence hung in the air. As time passed, Filia turned her face lower and lower. “I suppose not...” she said, in a tone of voice that could only be described as disappointed.

But Ashley’s brain kicked into gear again. “I...I was just a little surprised is all. You talk like a kid, you know that?”

Filia’s face suddenly lit up, like a flower in full bloom. “You think so? According to a fortune-teller, I can carry myself with grace on the outside, but I’m still a child at heart.”

“That sounds about right,” said Ashley. “Though you don’t seem particularly graceful on the outside either.”

“Hey, that’s mean!” protested Filia, pouting. But even though she was pouting, she was pretty enough to pull it off.

Ashley was the younger of the two, but she realized she found Filia incredibly adorable.

Friends, huh? Ashley had gotten along well enough with everyone in her village, but it had been a small village, unfortunately. There had been no children there her own age, and she’d never had anyone that she could call a real friend before.

She had never even thought about wanting a friend until now, but...maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Oh, Ashley, are you smiling?” Filia peered at Ashley’s face as she was lost in thought. Ashley hurriedly tried to hide her face with both her hands, but it was too late: Filia had already seen Ashley’s broad smile. “You’re really cute when you smile.”

“Y-you mind your own business!” Ashley tried to shoo Filia away, waving her off, but she couldn’t wave away her own smile.

At this, Ashley finally told Filia that she no longer had any intention of going into the forest, but to her surprise, Filia stubbornly refused to give up on her offer to fight Yuri. “I’ve already fought him

once before, after all.”

From there, the two parted ways. Filia decided that in one week, she’d fight Yuri in the same place where Ashley had fought him earlier that day.

Ashley, now alone, looked up at the night sky. After talking with Filia, she had realized something: She’d been tied down by the word “prodigy.” But now a man named Yuri had defeated her, and an elf named Filia was concerned about her.

Ashley was, in the end, a thirteen-year-old child. In that instant, she felt like a long, heavy chain, which had until then been wrapped around her body, fall away at long last.

“I see,” she murmured, gazing up at the stars shining far away. “Maybe I don’t have to be perfect.” Ashley’s words faded into the chilly air.

Chapter 5: Yuri vs. Filia

“**B**ACK ON IT AGAIN today, Filia?”

“Sorry, but yes, I’ll be busy today too. Rather, I’ll be busy the entire time over the next three days until it’s time for our fight. I’m going through intensive training, after all. So I can win.”

It had been four days since my duel with Ashley. Filia, as usual of late, had been off doing her own thing.

I didn’t know what had happened that night, but I did know that Filia and I would be fighting. Until we did, Filia said, she was going to do some personalized intensive training. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy to fight Filia, but I didn’t really wanna accept requests by myself. Most A-Rank requests weren’t just something you could knock out in one day and come back, after all.

I’d thought about training in the Demon Forest, the only place nearby that really worked for that kind of thing, but apparently Filia and Ashley were already using it as their spot. It’d be awkward if I bumped into them there, so...nah. Normally, I would’ve considered going on a long trip or something, but if I went too far away from Filia, there was always the off chance she could be kidnapped, and then how could I do anything to stop it? It wasn’t *super* likely, but better safe than sorry.

“Huh? Is something the matter?” asked Filia.

Perhaps I’d been staring at her too much, because Filia tilted her head and looked puzzled. Her long silver hair swayed about, gently pulled by gravity.

“Nothin’...you go on ahead.”

“Excellent. Well, I’m off!”

I didn’t say I was worried—I could tell from the look in her eye that I’d get teased for it. I just watched her go in silence.

“Well, guess I’ll start training.” There were still lots of things to do even without accepting any requests. I pounded my fists together with a

loud crack and put on a bold smile.

Several hours later, I was working out alone in the quiet room, sunlight streaming in. To other people, it might have looked like I wasn't really doing anything, but I was gushing sweat like a waterfall. This training was very intense. What I was doing was called an "air chair," but it wasn't just a simple "air chair." No, I was basically floating in the air from a seated position.

I was pushing my body into the air by moving my legs so fast that you couldn't even see an afterimage. To stop myself from spinning, I also had to keep moving my hands in order to maintain balance. Since I had to keep using both my arms and legs constantly in this exercise, it was extremely difficult to keep it up, even if I was only going at it for a few minutes.

"Agh!" I stopped my air chair in midair and landed on the floor. I used my sweat-drenched shirt to try to wipe still more sweat from my face. Both my arms and legs cried out in exhaustion—they said I'd been moving them too vigorously. Too cruelly. I ignored them.

When it's time to rest, you should rest. But this wasn't that time.

Ah, they're growing. I can feel my muscles growing! The corner of my mouth curled up into a grin. Honestly, that was why I did muscle training. Feeling myself getting stronger was an incomparable pleasure.

"All right, what next...huh?" I looked up at the ceiling. I heard sounds coming from the roof.

Drip, drip. It was raining.

"Perfect." There was a great exercise you could only do indoors on a rainy day. The exercise was called "counting the number of raindrops hitting the roof." It was just the right kind of training to do at a time like this. Surely the Muscle God had given me the gift of rain in light of my tireless efforts.

"Thanks, Muscle God!" I showed gratitude to my muscles and began my next exercise.

One hundred fifty-nine thousand, eight hundred and seven. One hundred fifty-nine thousand, eight hundred and eight. One hundred fifty-nine-thousand, eight hundred and nine...

A few hours passed in this way. I counted the number of raindrops with single-minded focus. As the rain grew more intense, the sound of

the raindrops hitting the roof sounded almost like a waterfall. It certainly was no easy feat to keep track of them all.

This exercise targeted two things. First were my ears, which I honed so that they could hear every sound, no matter how small. Second was my thought process, which I honed so that I could process information and count while listening with my ears.

This way, I trained both things at the same time! I closed my eyes and focused all my senses solely on the information that I could obtain from my ears. By relying on a single organ, that one organ could become exponentially sharper.

Just then, my ears caught a sound other than the sound of the rain. While I continued counting the raindrops in my mind, my brain recognized the sound of someone approaching the door to my room.

“I’m back!” A pleasant voice like the ringing of a bell. Filia had returned. From her footsteps, I could tell that she wasn’t wandering around; she was walking directly toward me. “Oh, Yuri, are you sleeping?”

Ah, I bet she thought that because my eyes were closed. I was standing in the direct middle of the room in a wide, imposing stance, but I had also often slept while standing up.

One hundred and fifty-nine-thousand, nine hundred and fifty. One hundred and fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty-one. One hundred and fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty-two...

I concentrated on my training without paying any mind to Filia. Now that Filia was back, I’d call it quits after one hundred and sixty-thousand.

“Yuriiii? Huh. Maybe he really is sleeping?” Filia walked around me over and over as I was standing there. The scent of soft flowers stimulated my nose.

Don’t come any closer! It’ll break my concentration! But...wait, that could become yet another kind of training! All right, Filia, I’ll accept your challenge!

One hundred fifty-nine-thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven. One hundred fifty-nine-thousand, nine hundred and ninety-eight. One hundred fifty-nine-thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine...one hundred sixty thousand!

“Still asleep, huh? Hmm. I bet I could pull a fun little prank on you... Tee hee hee!”

“I’m awake.”

“Upth-bwah?!” shouted Filia, in an odd voice.

After enduring temptation and finishing my count all the way up to one hundred sixty thousand, I opened my eyes, feeling refreshed. Standing right in front of me was Filia, a thick black marker in hand.

More importantly, though, how in the world had she made such weird words fly out of her mouth so instantaneously? Was that a kind of training too?

“O-oh, you’re awake...” she mumbled. “Please don’t surprise me like that.”

“Sorry, my bad. By the way, what’s with the marker you’re holding in your hand?”

“Th-this? This is...a good question! Hmm! I just, uh. Don’t remember. Sorry!”

Liar. She had definitely meant to draw all over my face. Filia acted all innocent, her eyes flicking about, and she was touching her face with her hands. “Well, whatever. You’ve been trainin’ today too, huh?”

“Of course. So there’s no need for you to be all depressed even if you lose to me, okay?” said Filia, letting out a little snort like she was trying to provoke me.

“Oho...interesting. Okay, then. If I lose, I’ll listen to one request from you, no matter what it is.”

“Really?! Wow, I’m feeling super motivated! Now then, what kind of unreasonable request am I going to make of you, mmm?”

“You’ve already decided it’ll be unreasonable, huh?”

Filia looked incredibly animated, like her mind was just crawling with ideas.

Maybe I’d made a mistake. Nah... I shook my head to try and get rid of weak thoughts like that. As long as I won, there wouldn’t be a problem. I’d never lose to anyone, no matter who!

While I was thinking that, Filia crossed her arms, looking very serious. Just as I was wondering what she was thinking, her peach-

colored lips parted, and she spoke. “But Yuri, it wouldn’t be fair if you were the only one to get punished for losing. Yes, it’s decided! If you win, I’ll give you the right to carry my bags the next time we go shopping!”

“No thanks.” I mean, wasn’t that more like a punishment for losing a game?

Filia’s eyes widened, as if she was incredibly surprised. “Oh? That’s so unusual, though. Isn’t allowing you to touch my personal belongings a reward? It is, isn’t it?”

“I honestly cannot believe how you say all that stuff with a straight face.”

“Oh, Yuri, please believe me: I am being unquestionably sincere,” Filia announced, putting her hand to her chest, wearing an angelic look—no, maybe even the look of a goddess. But when you compared that look to the words coming out of her mouth? Jeez, she was just rotten to the core!

“If you’re being sincere, that’s worse! You know that, right?”

“Know what?”

“Ugh. Anyway, I won’t need a reward like that when I beat you!” I declared.

“Oh? Well, I refuse to lose, Yuri! I’m training reallllly hard, and I’m going to beat you to a pulp!” she retorted, meeting my arrogant declaration with her own.

Even so, just being able to fight Filia was getting me pumped up! I knew Filia could freely call the Wind God now, but I still didn’t know how serious she was going to be in this fight.

Ah, c’mon, calendar! Can you move a little faster? Just three days...

The calendar listened, but it still took three days.

Filia, Ashley, and I were once again standing in the wide-open wilderness, in the same place where Ashley and I had fought a week prior. Filia and I walked out onto the battleground, which was sparsely covered with withered, thin, yellow-ish vegetation, and stood facing one

another.

“I never thought the day would come when I’d fight you, Filia,” I said.

I’d had her blast me with her magic before, but that had just been training. Today wasn’t a training session. This was real combat. Of course, this wasn’t the kind of fight where we’d be taking each other’s lives or anything. Still, I had no intention of holding back.

“Do your best, Filia!” called Ashley.

Filia nodded. “Yeah, I’ll do my best for you!”

Wait, had they become friends during their training or something? Ashley was cheering for Filia, and Filia was responding with a big smile.

Well, whatever. I didn’t really care, but it still kinda felt like I was playing the part of the bad guy.

“Get a good look, Yuri! Filia is going to work you over!”

“Yep!” Filia added. “I’m seriously going to pop you one!”

“What does ‘pop me one’ even mean?” Huh, that was curious. When Ashley looked over to me, she had a smile of satisfaction on her face. Her red twin tails looked nice against the setting sun.

“Heh! You’ve fallen for it, Yuri. The onomatopoeia we’ve used, ‘pop,’ is part of a strategy we’ve been agonizing over for the past week, so that we can keep you from being able to focus on battle!” said Ashley, pointing at me enthusiastically.

Filia groaned. “Ashley, it doesn’t work if you *tell* him.”

Ashley blinked. “J-just...forget about that last part, okay?!”

“Talk about sloppy,” I muttered.

Then again, if their strategy was to break my concentration, they were kinda doing that right now. A little bit. But once we actually started to fight, it wouldn’t matter at all. I’d just toss all of those distracting thoughts right out of my mind.

“Phew.”

I let out a deep breath. I exhaled the air out of my lungs, sucked in fresh air, and turned all my attention toward the battle. In battle mode, my mind was clear and sharp. My thoughts were focused only on achieving victory. I released my muscles, and now, standing there with

my much larger body, I looked over at Filia, who was just about ten feet away.

“Filia, you ready? I’m all set.”

“Yes. I’m ready whenever you are.” Filia returned my gaze with her own, looking straight at me with her silver eyes. I sensed no speck of fear in her gaze, none whatsoever. All I could sense reflected in her glittering gaze was a powerful sense of determination.

I couldn’t help but smile at that. This was great. This was super great! It was impossible for me not to smile when I had someone so strong looking right at me like that.

We faced each other.

In the next instant, as the heavenly bodies of generations looked down upon us from above the thin cloud cover, Filia made her move.

“I’m not going to hold back!” shouted Filia.

A giant made of winds enveloped her body: the Wind God. Filia played her hand, suddenly using the best ability she had at her disposal. The Wind God threw a punch at me with swiftness that belied its massive size.

“That’s it!” I roared. “Come at me!”

I countered the oncoming wind fist with my Pistol Punch. The figure of the giant shuddered for a moment, but my attack wasn’t enough to cancel it out. Its fist came closer and closer to me. Yeah, this was the stuff. This was the kind of moment that made fighting worth it.

“Take this!” I threw a direct punch at the giant. The titan collided with my well-trained fist, and one of its arms dissipated.

“Wh-wha?!”

Filia let out a cry of surprise, but I was even more shocked. I couldn’t believe that the Wind God was so tough that I couldn’t destroy its whole body even after a direct punch. On top of that, the wind rushing out from the collapse of the giant’s arm knocked me off balance.

No way was Filia going to let that chance pass her by. She cast fire magic at me.

“Hrgh!” I took the blast head-on. My clothes were burned up, but my body wasn’t damaged. “Is that it?”

“Jeez, you really aren’t human at all,” Filia grumbled. “Maybe you could go a little easy on me?”

I took a step to the side and gave Filia a look. In the next instant, lightning struck the spot where I’d just stood. “Nice try, but I’m not gonna let my guard down so easily.”

It was clever of her to prepare that spell while talking to me, but I wasn’t gonna be done in by something so trivial. She’d probably poured all of her might into that attack.

Filia looked on with a tight smile, her cheeks twitching. “How did you know? That I was preparing to cast my magic, I mean?”

“Intuition.”

“That’s so not fair!” Filia moaned.

“More importantly, though, you okay? Because I can see that you’re wide open right now,” I replied, plotting how to get in closer. The giant had already reformed its arm, but once I got within arm’s reach, it would be difficult for it to use any powerful attacks. Filia knew that if she carelessly let the giant throw a punch too soon, she might become collateral damage.

“Wait! Don’t come any closer!” Filia cast fire and wind magic at me, but I ignored the damage and charged straight at her.

“Somethin’ like that’s not gonna stop me!” I went straight for Filia and smacked the wind giant enveloping her. For a moment, my fist was pushed back by the wind giant’s body—but it soon broke through and reached Filia.

“Ugh!”

Filia went flying, and I chased after her. She’d collapsed on the ground. I straddled her chest now, my fist at the ready.

“You still wanna do this, Filia?”

“I still do! I’m...not...going to *lose*!”

Filia still wasn’t giving up? I was a little surprised at that. If this had been the old Filia, we would’ve been done right then and there. There had been some kind of change in her mental state or something. Or maybe Ashley’s training had had a positive effect on her?

But if we kept going from here, I was gonna have to actually hurt Filia. I really wanted to avoid that. I was glad Filia was so determined

now, but I was somewhat less than stoked about it at a time like this.

“It’s great that you’re not giving up, but come on. Look at the situation rationally. During a fight, I go all out. I might even aim for the face, you know? How can you defend against that when I’m on top of you?”

I had to resort to threats—I didn’t have a choice. The truth is, you have to be a little bit rough to make an opponent surrender if they’re being stubborn. I think Filia saw I meant it by the look in my eyes. She understood.

Slowly, she closed her eyes. “I...surrender.” She shook her head side-to-side weakly.

I lowered my fist.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, offering my hand. I’d been careful not to injure her too greatly, but you could never fully avoid minor injuries like bruises and cuts.

“I’m okay. Nothing major.” Filia took my hand and stood up. Once she was on her feet, she patted her clothes, brushing off the grass and dirt. “What about you, though? Are you all right, Yuri? I hit you with all my magic at the end of our fight...”

“Ah, yeah, think I got hit a bit.” I lifted my shirt to show the damage. I’d gotten some light burns from her fire magic and some thin cuts from her wind magic.

“That’s practically nothing...” Filia muttered.

“It’s ’cause I’ve trained.”

“Ah, yes,” said Filia. “I suppose so. What else could I expect from the great Yuri?”

Filia cast her recovery magic, a look of utter resignation in her eyes. A white light enveloped me, and all my wounds were completely healed.

“Thanks, Filia. Also, that was way fun! Let’s do it again!”

“I don’t *want* to do it again, though,” said Filia. “The sight of you just coming at me no matter how much magic I blasted you with was, well. It was nothing short of terrifying.”

Filia didn’t want a rematch? Weird. We’d had such a great time, you know?

“Filia, are you all right?!” Ashley came running up to Filia from where she’d been watching, her twin tails swaying.

“Yes, I am...but I lost. I’m sorry,” said Filia with a weak chuckle.

“No, it’s okay. There’s no need for you to apologize, Filia. I’m the one who should be apologizing.” Ashley grabbed the sleeves of her own dress and squeezed herself. “I was just being stubborn. Next time, I’ll admit defeat and try my best. Filia, you taught me that. Thank you...so much.”

The corners of Filia’s mouth curved upward into a happy smile. “I like the sound of that. I’m sure that you’ll surpass Yuri in no time, Ashley. You are a prodigy, after all.”

Filia and Ashley smiled at one another.

“That’s exactly what I want to hear, so bring it on,” I announced, interrupting them. “If you can surpass me, then go ahead and do it. But just so you know, this muscle wall is thick and solid. I’ll be training every single muscle fiber in my entire body.”

Ashley shot me an unamused look, then turned to Filia. “Hey, Filia? I can’t understand what he’s saying. Not at all.”

“Let’s just leave him be. I’d worry more if you did understand him.”

Hey, c’mon! Were they really gonna just ignore me? I sighed. “Anyway, you guys look like you’re practically sisters now. When did you two get so close?”

“When we were training. Right, Ashley?” said Filia, smiling.

Ashley, however, didn’t share the look. For some reason, she had a stiff expression, like she was nervous about something. “Sisters... H-hey, Filia?”

“What’s the matter?”

“I-Is it okay if I call you that? Big Sis?” asked Ashley. She clutched her sleeves, looking down with her eyes closed. It was like her unyielding spirit from before had vanished in a flash.

“Um.” Filia didn’t give her an immediate answer.

Or, hmm. It was more like there was a silence, as if time itself had stopped. Ashley closed her eyes and waited for a response, but I guess she just couldn’t bear the feeling of not knowing. Then she looked up,

seeming like she was about to cry.

“I-I suppose it’s really presumptuous of me to call you that, after all!” Ashley stammered. “I’m sorry, just forget what I—”

“No, Ashley, that’s not it,” I said, pointing at Filia. “She just fainted.”

Filia was still standing there, her eyes wide open, but she was totally out cold. It was really odd of her to just black out like that while standing up.

“Ah!” Filia shouted, suddenly coming back to her senses. “I’m sorry, you were just so cute that it knocked me unconscious!”

“What in the world does that even mean?” I asked. I honestly had no clue what the causal relationship was there. *Please, Filia, explain to me the physiology of how that works.*

Filia excitedly stretched her arms out to Ashley, took Ashley’s hands in hers, and shook them vigorously up and down. “Ashley...no, I mean, Little Sis! Yes, please! Please, please, *please* do call me that! Call me Big Sis!”

“D-do you mean it? Then—thank you for today. I hope we’ll get even closer, Big Sis!”

“Same here, Ashley!”

All right, so, uh. I guess all’s well that ends well. A happy ending. Filia was having fun, at least, so I guessed that was good? “Hey, Ashley,” I said. “If you want, you can call me Big Bro, ya know?”

“Just calling you Yuri is fine. Because now you and I are rivals, competing over Big Sis!” said Ashley, pointing at me emphatically.

Uhhh. When had that happened? But I got the feeling I couldn’t argue with her.

At once, Filia stepped between Ashley and me. “Please, you two,” she said. “Don’t fight over me! Heh. Eh he he! Oh, I’ve always wanted to say that! Ahhh. Dreams do come true!”

“I see,” I said. “That’s good.”

I had no idea *what* was good about it, mind you, but Filia seemed happy, and I wasn’t gonna take that from her.

I felt a little tug on my sleeve. I looked down and saw Ashley facing me, her eyes cast downward and her cheeks flushed, like she was

feeling embarrassed. “But I am grateful to you, you know,” she said. “If I hadn’t fought you, I wouldn’t have realized that I was being held back. So, thank you.”

Huh. She was surprisingly cute—

“Though obviously I’m *much* more grateful to Big Sis. Yuri, you should be grateful to Big Sis too!” said Ashley, doing a complete turn, still holding onto my arm.

I knew it! She wasn’t cute after all.

“Yes, Yuri, please be grateful to me! Come on, hurry it up!” Filia cried.

And neither was she.

Chapter 6: If You Catch a Cold, Take Care of Yourself

“**Y**UUUHI, goob morning...”

It was the morning after our fight, and the first words out of Filia’s mouth when she got out of bed didn’t sound right. Her voice was hoarse.

“Jeez, Filia, you sound like a zombie. And your face is kinda red.”

“Huugh...?” As that mysterious sound came out of Filia’s throat, I noticed that her cheeks were way flushed. Filia was usually still sleepy in the mornings, but today her eyes were even puffier than normal.

“Ah-choo! Ugh, I think I caught a cold.” Filia blew her nose with a tissue. “My head hurts...” A full-blown cold. Oof. “I might have gone a little overboard with my training...” she lamented as she laid down on her bed, placing a wet towel on her head.

“Wait, is that really how you get a cold? I’ve always pushed myself to the limit in training, and I’ve never caught one.” Sure, Filia had been training more seriously than before, but if that was all it took, why hadn’t I ever caught one?

“Ah, that’s right,” Filia mumbled, staring at me blankly. “They do say that idiots don’t catch colds, don’t they?”

“I’m an intellectual muscle man, though...”

“Then you’re an idiotic intellectual muscle man.”

I’m idiotic even though I’m an intellectual? What in the world could that even mean? I groaned. “Oh, man, my head’s starting to hurt just from trying to figure that one out.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ve got a case of head bombs.”

“Head bombs? What is that?”

“It’s a disease where your head suddenly explodes and you die.”

“Don’t say somethin’ so scary!” What a terrifying disease. I definitely did *not* want to die outside of battle!

“I’m sorry,” said Filia, exhaling a hot breath. “I’m a little tired. I’m

going to rest today.” The mattress moved up and down along with the movement of her chest.

“Yeah. You make sure you get your sleep. Take it easy.”

“I’m...completely useless!” Filia moaned in a hoarse voice.

“What do you mean?”

Was it her illness making her feel weak? I’d heard it said that when your body is weak, your spirit feels weak too. Maybe it was time for some encouragement.

As I thought about that, Filia continued speaking, looking frustrated. “I just thought of the most brilliant way to tease you, Yuri, but...I can’t seem to get the words out.”

“It’s okay if you can’t get the words out. Better, even.”

“So disappointing...so, so disappointing,” Filia moaned. “I curse my lack of strength...” Heartbroken, she bit her lower lip so hard that it practically turned white.

It wasn’t normal for her to be *that* disappointed. Jeez, how much of her heart and soul did she pour into making fun of me, anyhow?

“Phew... Phew...”

After some time had passed, Filia had fallen asleep. She really had been exhausted after all. I figured I ought to replace the towel on her forehead. I picked up the towel and put it in ice water. When the towel was cold enough, I picked it back out from the water and wrung it out well.

“There we g—huh?”

It seemed I’d wrung the towel out *too* well, because now it was a tattered rag. Well, I didn’t have any other choice except to get a new towel and try again. Being extra careful paid off that time, and I successfully managed to wring out the excess water.

“Hey, Filia, this might be a little cold.” I placed the towel on her forehead.

She reacted for just a moment after I draped it on, letting out an “Mm...” But she didn’t wake up, and I soon heard her fall back to sleep.

Making sure not to look at her bare skin peeking through her

slightly exposed pajamas, I adjusted her clothes.

“Guess I’ll head out then.”

After I double-checked that Filia was asleep, I left the room.

I was making my way down the main street of Jeepupp when I saw a girl running from the other direction, her red twin tails swaying as she ran. It was Ashley. As soon as her eyes met mine, she ran toward me as fast as her legs could carry her.

“Yuri! I heard that Big Sis is sick?!” asked Ashley, out of breath. She looked incredibly intense.

“Yeah, she—wait a minute. How do you know that?”

“Sister senses!” she said matter-of-factly. She was talking complete nonsense again, huh? “I can’t just wait around like this! I have to go watch over her!” With that, Ashley dashed off for the inn.

“H-hey!” I shouted as she ran off, but she was already fading from view. “She’s sleeping right now, so don’t disturb her! Don’t do anything to make Filia have to fuss over yooooou!”

I had already given Ashley a key to our room so she’d be able to get in, but I didn’t want her to make any trouble for Filia. I wasn’t super confident that just asking her not to bother Filia would help.

“I know!” Ashley shouted back, and she was gone.

Well, she clearly idolized Filia, so she *probably* wouldn’t do anything to cause her discomfort. Besides, with an S-Rank like Ashley on standby, the room would be well protected. With that comforting thought, I started off down the main street once again.

After a bit out on the town, I finished my business and returned to the inn. When I opened the front door, I sensed a different presence inside other than Filia. It seemed Ashley was still there. I came inside without saying a word so that I wouldn’t wake Filia up in case she was still sleeping.

“W-welcome back!”

The person to greet me was none other than Filia, still lying on the bed. She was already awake. Based on the sound of her voice, it seemed like she was feeling better than she had this morning. And there, draped over the edge of the bed, was a sleeping Ashley.

“She bother you at all?” I asked.

“No, no, Ashley is a very polite girl. She didn’t trouble me in the least. She even held my hand, which helped me sleep soundly.” Filia smiled fondly at Ashley, who seemed pretty deep into unconsciousness. Filia raised her arm to show me and, sure enough, Ashley was still firmly holding her hand.

“I see. That’s good.”

I studied Ashley for a moment. She gave off the impression of someone with an unyielding spirit, but she looked so gentle like this. I thanked her for taking care of Filia and laid a blanket over her.

A little while later, Ashley slid down from the bed and woke with a start. “Hm? Did I fall asleep?” She looked around the room as she yawned, scanning the surrounding area with her red eyes, her vision presumably still a little blurry.

“You were out like a light,” said Filia.

“I-I’m sorry, Big Sis. And here I was, thinking that I came all this way to take care of you when I ended up falling asleep myself. I didn’t even do anything...”

Filia waved away the apology. “No, no, I’m just happy that you came. Besides, it looks like you changed the towel on my head a few times, and you even held my hand. What you did for me made me very happy, Ashley. Don’t say you didn’t do anything, okay?”

“B-Big Sis!” Ashley’s nose twitched and her eyes began to water.

I winced. “Don’t cry...”

“I-I’m not crying!” she insisted. Nevertheless, a clear liquid was pouring out from Ashley’s eyes, though they (reportedly) were not tears.

“Well, then, I think it’s about time we eat,” I said. “Whaddya say?”

Now that Ashley was awake, I figured it was lunch o’clock. I couldn’t exactly leave it to Filia to handle the meal on account of her having a cold, so I headed for the kitchen. Cooking wasn’t my forte, but I wasn’t bad at it either. Filia and I had been cooking in shifts, after all. Just as I was about to start preparing to get cooking, Ashley came into the kitchen too.

“I suppose if you’re back, then I should be going,” said Ashley.

“What? Goin’ home already? Why don’t you stick around and

have a bite to eat?” Given Ashley’s personality, I’d been expecting her to say that she wanted to stay over.

But Ashley turned down my offer with a serious look on her face. “No, I can’t. I know that sick people might feel a little lonely by themselves, but they can end up getting even sicker if things are too rowdy. I really do want to stick around, but...no matter how I feel, I don’t want to be a bother.”

Wow. I hadn’t thought of that at all. Was she actually really smart?

“You’ve really been giving this a lot of thought,” I observed.

“Unlike you, Yuri,” she replied, snorting.

“Rude. I give things a lot of thought too, you know.”

I showed her a book I’d bought while out on the town. A picture of rice porridge was displayed prominently on its cover. I’d gone out of my way to buy it. “I’ve been studying up the food you should feed people when they’re under the weather. I’m sure Filia could eat this without straining herself too much. Would you mind helping out a little?”

“Huh. You’ve really been quite thoughtful when it comes to Big Sis too.” Ashley blinked her red eyes in surprise. “To be honest, it’s improving my opinion of you.”

There wasn’t anything strange about that, to be clear: I was, after all, a gentle muscle man. Didn’t mean I wasn’t glad to have impressed her, even if just a little bit. “Filia is my invaluable partner. It’s only natural that I’d care for her.”

“Ngh! I-I’m not going to lose!”

“Uh. What?” I had absolutely no clue where this competitive stance was coming from.

“Grrr!” Ashley flashed her white teeth as she...growled? It looked like she was trying to intimidate me.



Well, whatever. Although I was slightly confused about whatever Ashley was doing, I started cooking.

Cooking itself wasn't really all that difficult. Even though I'd never made food for a sick person before, I figured I could put something together. Ashley had admitted that she wasn't very good at this kind of thing, so I asked her to take care of some miscellaneous preparation elements.

After I'd made a little bit progress, I called out to Ashley, who was still in the middle of her own task. "Hey, have you ever caught a cold before?"

"Well, yeah," said Ashley, nodding as if it was only natural.

"I haven't. Is it pretty rough? Catching a cold?"

"Well, when you're sick, you're *sick*, so...yeah? It's pretty rough. Huh, I guess it's really true what they say: Idiots don't catch colds."

"Hm. Filia told me the same thing."

"Ohhh, does that mean that Big Sis and I think alike? That's! So! Cool!"

"I...see." Seriously, just how much did this girl idolize Filia?

I smiled wryly at her, and she smiled happily back. However, before long, it was time for Ashley to head out. The food was done, though, and Filia was up. Ashley waved to her on her way out.

"Well, I'll be heading home now. See you later, Big Sis!"

"Mm-hm. Thank you for everything today, Ashley."

With that, Ashley left, just as she'd said she would.

"Ashley really is such a good girl, isn't she?"

"Yeah, I guess so." At the very least, she wasn't a bad person. Maybe a bit impudent, though. Well, she was just a *little* impudent, I supposed.

Food finished, I carried a tray over to Filia's bed. When I laid it all out, she looked at me in surprise, then compared the different dishes.

"You...went through all the trouble of making this for me?"

"I am a gentle muscle man, after all."

"I still have no idea what that means, but...thank you so much,

truly.” Filia bowed her head to me. Then she started chowing down, though she had a few occasional coughing fits while chewing.

“Is it good?”

“It’s fairly tasty.”

Fairly, huh? Well, fairly was fair. It wasn’t like I was much of a cook myself. On top of that, I’d heard that food for sick people was designed more for ease of edibility than taste.

“I know it’s terribly rude to say this after you’ve just cooked for me,” said Filia, “but I do think regular food is tastier. Though I suppose I couldn’t bring myself to eat such a thing right now, even if I wanted to.”

“Then you need to get better soon.”

“I’ll do my best. I’ll eat this all up and be right as rain again.” Filia opened her mouth wide, stuffed her cheeks with food like a squirrel, chewed...and had an intense coughing fit.

“Don’t push yourself.”

Before long, Filia was clasping her hands together in front of the now-empty dishes. “Thank you for the meal.”

“Can I take these away, then?”

“Thank you very much, but...please don’t secretly lick those dishes behind my back or anything, even if they *are* the dishes this beautiful elf girl just used. Okay?”

“Like hell I’d do that!” Okay, how big of a pervert did she think I was, anyway?

After I finished washing the dishes, I sat down on my bed, beside Filia’s. It was still just past noon. I had enough time to go and handle a request, but I figured I might as well call it off for the day. Ashley had only gone back home because I was here. If I didn’t stay, it would’ve been a waste for her to leave.

Besides, I’d just learned that when someone is sick, they want someone by their side.

“Yuri. Do you mind if I touch your muscles?” asked Filia.

My eyes widened. “F- Filia?! So you’ve finally realized the splendor of muscle?!”

“Yuri, please be quiet...your voice is making my head split ...”

“S-sorry...” I quickly lowered the volume of my voice as Filia held her head in her hands.

But wow, really? I’d never imagined that Filia would finally ask to touch my muscles.

“Let me be very clear, Yuri, so there isn’t any misunderstanding. I’m not some muscle fan now, okay? I just want to try siphoning some of your seemingly excessive amount of energy through your muscles.”

“Either way, that’s fine with me. Honestly, I am feeling absolutely, intensely moved right now.”

“H-huh...” Filia looked confused.

Regardless, I held my right arm out to her and partially released my muscles. When compared to my left arm, which was in its normal state, my right arm was about three or four times thicker now. “Go on, touch it. As much as you want.”

“All right then, if you insist.” Filia hesitantly stretched out her hand, placing it flat against my arm. Her skin was usually cool to the touch, but today, with her cold, her palm was hot. After holding her hand on my arm for some ten seconds or so, she took her hand away.

“Did you get any of my power?” I asked.

“Yes, I siphoned out a good chunk of your power for myself. I’ll be good as new tomorrow,” said Filia, smiling.

Her smile was beautiful, but it somehow seemed kind of forced. Maybe she was trying to put on a brave front so she wouldn’t worry me.

Hmm. If that was the case, my only option was to let her see more of my muscles so she could feel well again!

“My muscle power can’t be drained so easily. And for your proof —” I released every muscle in my body. My jacket exploded, exposing my well-trained upper torso. My muscles remained as strong and full of life as ever. “See?”

“Aaaaand now things are just uncomfortable. Please stop!”

“Um. Sorry.”

Cowed by the apologetic-yet-annoyed look on Filia’s face, I regained my composure and quickly gathered up the scattered remains of my clothes.

The next day, I checked on Filia first thing.

“Morning, Filia. How you feeling?” I asked, calling out to her just after she woken up.

Filia made an “ahh, ahh” sound in her throat, put her hand to her forehead, and did a ton of other things, but eventually, she opened her mouth to speak with a look of disbelief on her face. “I think I’m feeling better, somehow.”

“I see. I’m glad.” I didn’t really know much about how all this worked, on account of never having had a cold before, but getting over it in a day did seem pretty quick. I was just glad that it hadn’t lasted too long.

“Was it because I touched your muscles after all, Yuri?” she murmured.

“That’s what I’d think. Muscles are amazing, after all.”

Once again, it just went to show that anything was possible through muscle!

Filia, who had supposedly recovered from her cold, started hugging herself for some reason. “My word, could Yuri’s muscle power really have flowed into me? I’m getting chills just imagining it.” She was trembling hard enough that her whole body was shaking, though it looked a little put on.

“Well, now that you’re finally better, don’t worry yourself ’til you feel awful again. Besides, shouldn’t you be happy? I mean, it’s muscle power, you know?”

“Of course not. It’s muscle power, you know?”

Wow, even after being healed thanks to muscle power? How ungrateful! Well, at least she was better.

“I sure am!” Filia grinned. “And now that I’m better, I can eat all the delicious food!”

“Don’t just read my mind like it’s nothing!” I was glad that she was healthy again, but I had a feeling she was just going to start pushing me around again.

“Now I can play with Yuri to my heart’s content!” Filia crowed.

“Don’t play with me...”

My face contorted with exhaustion. Filia just smiled wickedly.

Chapter 7: Donuts Are Delicious

THE NEXT DAY, Filia and I were out and about. We weren't out doing a request, of course. No, we were celebrating Filia's recovery. I couldn't let her do something reckless like accepting a request in her state, not just after getting better.

"It sure is nice, being able to eat good food again," said Filia. "It cheers me right up!"

"That's good." Filia had been feeling chipper about the prospect of more decent vittles all morning.

She really seemed to be enjoying that wonderful, lively feeling you apparently got after recovering from illness. I'd heard that health was something you only appreciated after you lose it, after all.

Filia, walking in front of me, almost bouncing with every step, turned back to look at me, her hair fluttering as she moved. "Oh, but I truly am grateful to you for this, Yuri. You know that, right? For making me porridge and things. Your cooking helped me get better in a jiffy. Thank you."

"Nah, it was the power of muscle."

"Ah, yes. I've decided to erase that part from my memory. Too scary."

Jeez, she altered her memory? I sighed and walked along beside her. She wore a blank expression, playing innocent. "Was there anything you wanted in particular? Get whatever you want. Even that slime whatever-it-was is fine by me."

"Slime Jelly sounds wonderful, but I'm in the mood for donuts today."

Donuts, huh? Well, I didn't have any particular objection to that. We headed on over to the donut shop in town, Filia leading the way.

"This must be it!" Even though it was just before noon, the donut shop was packed. The pleasant aroma permeating the store really got

my appetite going. The people at their tables happily munched on donuts. I supposed that, as a foodie herself, Filia's choice in restaurants was impeccable. Once we entered the shop, she looked around happily.

By the time I was done reading the menu, I was salivating so much that I had to gulp it down. There were *dozens* of donuts to choose from.

"Oh, wow, they have quite a variety, don't they?" In stark contrast to my glee, Filia stood there looking downright intimidated or something, eyebrows furrowed and everything. "This isn't good..." she muttered.

"What isn't?" I asked.

"There are too many! I just can't choose..."

"Uhh." She had to be messing around, right? The gap between her enthusiasm and her words was simply too much. But she seemed quite serious. She put her hand to her mouth and pondered the matter like a skilled general analyzing a map. "Yuri," she declared, "let's share half of every donut we order. That way, we can eat twice as many different kinds while ordering the same amount."

"You seem, uh, kinda super serious about this."

"Eating is like battle. I can't eat all the food I want, so I have to focus on quality," she explained.

I reflexively rubbed my eyes. I could almost see an aura rising from her. Where was this fighting spirit when we handled requests? I guessed that just went to show how passionate she was about food. Either way, I wanted her to eat as much as she desired.

"I don't really get the difference between half of these flavors," I said. "You can order for me."

She understood my true intentions at once, and she clasped my hand tightly. "Oh, Yuri! I'm so fortunate to have met you, Yuri!" she exclaimed in a clear, bright tone.

Boy, she could lay it on thick!

Filia ordered the donuts, her peach-colored lips moving quickly from one word to the next, effortlessly spinning her order like pure silk. After she'd finally finished placing the order, she nodded in satisfaction. "I'm sure that I'll be satisfied with an order that large," she said aloud.

“Well, that’s good.”

“Since we’re here, let’s eat inside,” said Filia, and the two of us took a seat together at a table with our haul. “Time to dig in!”

Filia picked the first donut off of our tower and brought it toward her small mouth. After she bit into it, her eyes opened wide, and she patted me excitedly on the shoulder. “Mmm! It’s delicious, Yuri!”

I happily took the second half when she handed it to me. The flaky texture was truly delightful. “Oooh, it sure is tasty!”

“I know, right? Eeeee! I’m so happy!”

Holding her hand to her cheek, Filia bit into another donut and exclaimed over its deliciousness as well. She went on to eat another, then another, and another...sighing in pleasure after every one. Each time she went to eat another, she handed me the remaining half of the one she’d just finished, so I ate just as much as she did. Some were flaky, some were moist, and some were springy.

Around the time that Filia started rubbing her stomach, I was starting to feel full too.

“If I eat any more, I’ll probably get fat! Oh, no, what should I do?” Filia groaned, looking down at yet another newly cleaned plate.

“If you do muscle training, you won’t get fatter. Wanna do it together?”

Filia barely seemed to register my words before quickly turning away. “If I eat any more, I’ll probably get fat! Oh, no, what should I do?”

“Don’t pretend you can’t hear me.”

“World, have mercy on me!”

Once again, she was completely hopeless. She fully intended to completely shut out anything that was inconvenient for her to hear. Then again, Filia was pretty skinny, so in my opinion, it would have done her some good to put on a few pounds.

While Filia and I bantered, I happened to notice a white-haired man at a table in the back. A slender guy dressed in a black coat, he seemed out of place in the bright store. The white-haired man ate his donut in complete silence, as if he didn’t have the least bit of interest in the people around him. But it wasn’t really the man’s appearance that

caught my attention, or the way he carried himself.

What I noticed was his *presence*. It stood out from the crowd like a sore thumb. I shot up from my seat.

“Yuri? What’s the matter? What’s the standing about?” Filia gave me a puzzled look.

“I’m gonna go talk to that guy over there. He looks strong.”

“Being Yuri again, I see. That’s fine, I suppose, but please don’t make any trouble, okay? Not for that man, and not for the whole store.”

“I know. I am a gentle muscle man, you know.” I headed over to the white-haired guy’s table. My ever faithful companion Filia followed right behind me. “Excuse me. You got a minute?”

My first impression on getting a closer look was that the fellow was practically a skeleton. In fact, he looked so thin that I thought for sure he had to be sickly or something. His face was bony and wan.

“Hm. What is it?” the man asked. “What do you want with me?” His answers were far more brusque and snappy than you’d expect from someone who looked so frail—at least outwardly.

“I was just thinkin’ that you look strong. If you’re all right with it, how about having a fight with me later?”

“Sorry, but I’m off work today. I’ll have to pass.”

Filia tilted her head. “Are you, by any chance, in the same line of work as us? We’re adventurers, but...”

Filia seemed hung up on the suggestion of a day off. Adventurers really cherished their holidays. Rest was actually a critical part of keeping fit and ready for requests. For myself, I often used my days off for muscle training, which made Filia ask if they were *really* days off, but that was another story.

Anyway, the man raised his eyebrow a little at that. Seemed Filia’s guess was right on the money. “Huh. So, I guess that makes you guys my juniors then or something? I’m the S-Rank adventurer Javagiir. Javagiir Garyundur.”

That was Filia for you—inspiring a sense of camaraderie with words alone.

“My name is Filia.”

“I’m Yuri.”

We both briefly introduced ourselves. But wow, this guy was S-Rank? Ashley was S-Rank too, but man, I hadn't realized S-Rank people really did *feel* different. Even though Javagiir was only talking, the aura rolling off of him was totally different from that of a normal person. I could tell he was suppressing it, but...

Man, I just gotta fight this guy!

Javagiir looked at me and I *knew* he could tell that I was just itching to go, an uncontrollable excitement shooting through my veins. He gave me a wry smile. "Huh. You're all hot-blooded while she seems cool and composed. You're a good pair. I envy you."

"Are you working alone, Javagiir?"

"Hm. I suppose you could say that," Javagiir said vaguely. Then he opened his arms out wide, deliberately theatrical, and said something sincerely weird. "I mean, really, as long as I have donuts, then I'm good. You know what I'm saying, ladies and gents? As long as you have donuts, life is all roses...no, I guess I should say life is all *donuts!* Get it?"

"Uh, no."

"If you don't get it, I'll teach you. All right. Are you watching closely?"

Javagiir searched around inside his coat pocket. From within it, he pulled out another donut. Now holding two different donuts, one in each hand, Javagiir raised them in front of his face. He peered through the middle of the donuts—through the holes—and stared at Filia and me with his sunken eyes. As he examined us through the donut holes, our gazes met. Javagiir nodded in apparent satisfaction and returned the donuts back to his pocket.

"And there you have it. Get it now?"

"Actually, I think I understand even less." In fact, I understood zero percent of what was happening.



It made so little sense to me that even my desire to fight had died out a bit. I shot a sideways glance at Filia, wondering if she got it, but she looked just as baffled as I felt.

Javagiir sighed at our confusion and said in a disappointed tone, “What? You don’t get it? The world just glitters when you look through a donut, doesn’t it?”

“Uh, no, nothin’ looks any different,” I said.

“Hrm, I see...I suppose everybody’s got their own moral compass. Don’t worry. I’m not angry with you just because you don’t understand. I’m one of the guild moderates.”

“I see, so there *are* more laid-back people among the S-Ranked guild members,” Filia mused. “That’s a bit of a relief, honestly.”

“Of course, I suppose there are some things you could do that would just cross the line—that would really set me off—but anyway, it’s about time I head out.” Javagiir stood from his seat and moved to leave the shop, but then he stopped. “Oh, by the way: If you *do* happen to like donuts, then I’ve got a good place to recommend. Donuts really are profound.”

“Would you?” asked Filia. “Why, thank you very much for going through all that trouble.”

“It’s all right. I mean, it’s an old-timer’s job to look out for the greenhorns.”

Awww, even a skeleton-looking guy could be a bro. “You mean that? Good to hear! In that case, that means you’ll fight me, right?!”

“I withdraw my statement. Sorry, greenhorn, but I’ve got my limits. Not gonna go quite that far for that, yeah? See ya.”

With that decisive rejection, Javagiir left the store.

“That’s too bad,” I moaned. “And he seemed so strong too...”

“Yuri,” said Filia gently, “it’s no good forcing someone into a confrontation. If that man has no wish to fight you, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Oh, I got it! Filia, instead, you and I could—also not fight, I suppose. You’ve only just gotten better, and we *did* just fight, and...” I sighed.

“Seriously, are you depressed? Come on, cheer up. How about we

head on back ourselves?” Filia lightly patted me and pushed my back, ushering me out of the donut shop.

As I tried to find comfort in her soft touch, I wondered: Could I become stronger if I stayed depressed forever? Would someone come and challenge mopey ol’ me to a fight? No! The answer to both was a big, fat no! If I had time to be depressed, then I had time to be training as much as I could, even if it was just for one second more. Someday, that one second might mean the difference between life and death! Thinking about that naturally got me fired up all over again.

“All right, Filia, let’s hurry back to the inn. Then, training!”

“Where did this energy come from?” Filia snorted.

“It’s all because of you, Filia! Thanks!”

“I didn’t really do anything, though?”

“As thanks, once you’re fully recovered, I’ll teach you the most insanely grueling training regimen ever! It’s a training method that’s so secret, I never show it to anyone! Rejoice, Filia!”

“There’s nothing to rejoice about! I’m fine, really! I’m fine! Yuri, I’m *perfectly fine!*”

Filia vigorously shook her hands as she tried to turn down my offer. Ah, that was Filia for you: Even though she was so happy, she made sure to stay humble. Man, Filia was amazing!

After we got back to the inn, I looked out from the window on the second floor, down to the city below. All those people hurried about their lives with such purpose...

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” asked Filia as she sat down on her soft bed. “I think I’ll probably be well enough to strain myself by then.”

“I don’t think I wanna take any requests tomorrow. Nah, I wanna take a day to train. Haven’t done that in a while. What about you, Filia?” I asked.

“Hmm, well, I think I have a pretty good handle on how to use the Wind God already, so I’ll just take a nice stroll about town. To train my

Clairvoyance,” said Filia.

I’d noticed her Wind God expertise in our fight. Filia seemed to know all the ins and outs of handling the Wind God now, even though she’d been pretty uneasy and unsure about it at first. It seemed like her training with Ashley had produced some awesome results.

Honestly, though, while Filia’s Wind God ability was definitely amazing, I thought her Clairvoyance was way more powerful, no matter how she framed it. The ability to know both your opponent’s abilities and their aptitude for magic? And better yet, it told you what they were thinking? It was so powerful that it was almost funny.

Add to that, Filia was way strong. Sure, I’d beat her the other day, but in the future...I couldn’t be so sure I’d be able to do it again. To make sure Filia couldn’t defeat me and to keep up with even stronger opponents, I had to train even harder.

“You don’t mind splitting up?” I asked.

“Oh, no, it’s quite all right with me. Just don’t get too lonely without the light of my presence, Yuri,” said Filia with a teasing chuckle.

I responded with an exasperated smile of my own and set to figuring out my training for the day.

As for Filia, she moved from her bed to the desk and started writing something. I couldn’t see what she was writing, but I probably wouldn’t have been able to understand it even if I did see. I could still take a guess as to what it was about: magic.

Since Filia had left her home village, it seemed she had been reformulating her theory of how her magic worked. I didn’t really get it, since I didn’t really need theory for muscle magic, but her magic power had really been improving of late. Whatever she was doing was clearly working.

I can’t afford to lose, I thought as I watched Filia scribble away so furiously it was like she was carving the words into the desk.

The next day, I left the inn without waiting for Filia to wake up. I wanted to practice a new technique I’d come up with on our first day of separate training. I needed to refine it until it was of practical use. For that reason, I had elected to continue prioritizing training over requests for the next little bit.

“What I really need is better cardio,” I said to myself. “Gotta train with everything I got.”

I set off and made my way to the city outskirts, then beyond. The area around the city of Jeepupp was well-maintained, so there was no need to worry about monsters. I walked farther and farther away from the city until the ground became uneven and the roads less populated.

“All right, this looks like a good spot.” I made sure that no one else was around, then I started sprinting as fast as I could go. My minimum goal? Five hundred miles per day.

“Graaah!”

I didn’t run like the wind; I *outran* it. I overtook it. For the next three days, I ran with all my heart and soul at an incalculable speed, kicking up clouds of dust in my wake.

Chapter 8: Gorillalas Are a Lot like Gorillas

AFTER RUNNING for three days and for a total of two thousand miles, I returned to the city, my body slightly covered in dust. People mistook me for some new kind of monster, but...eh. Someone blasted me with magic as we passed one another without even bothering to say a word, so I stopped, thinking that they'd wanted to fight.

"Huh?" they said, surprising me. "Wait, are you...human?"

Wasn't it obvious? How could I be anything else? When I talked to him, he revealed a shocking truth: the guild had mistaken me for some kind of new monster, and now they were trying to organize a team to take me out. Oof. Made me realize I needed to stay instead of head out for more training. I'd wanted to run for another two thousand miles, but I didn't want to cause more trouble, and I was worried about Filia.

"I'm back!" When I got back to the inn, Filia and Ashley were there. Ashley had come to visit again. She was dressed in red clothes, as usual. Jeez, she was all about that tomato aesthetic, huh?

"Yuri, welcome back!"

"Thanks. Am I interrupting anything?" I didn't really know how this stuff worked, being a guy and all, but I didn't want to break up girl talk. Maybe my timing was a little bad.

"Not really," said Ashley. "But ideally, I'd rather be the only one here. Yes," she added, pouting in disappointment, "that would be the best."

"Be the only one? For *me*? Aw, come on, knock it off! You're embarrassin' me..."

"No, not for you!" Ashley snapped. "What are *you* acting all embarrassed for?!"

"Oh, you knew I was acting? You've really got talent."

"Talent for what?"

"You've gotta figure that one out for yourself."

“Huh?! I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying!”

If you just give people all the answers, they won’t develop the ability to think for themselves. So you see, I was helping Ashley become a more perfect adult in the future. Such is the burden of an intellectual muscle man!

“Hmph! Yuri, you big idiot! I don’t even care!” she pouted, turning around and sitting down away from me in protest.

I couldn’t help but smile at the huffy look on her face, which she didn’t even try to hide. “Come on, don’t pout. You’re charming.”

“Ch-charming?! Hey, wait a minute Yuri! You’re treating me like a child, aren’t you?”

“Naw! Sorry, sorry. There, there.” I patted Ashley on the head.

“There, there?! You *are* treating me like a child!” Ashley puffed her cheeks out angrily.

I patted her head again. “Sorry. Really.”

“Well, okay...as long as you’re sorry.” Ashley let out a snort and crossed her arms. I couldn’t help but find it adorable that she was trying so hard to act grown-up, but I wasn’t about to tell her that and get her mad at me all over again.

“You two always get along so well,” said Filia nonchalantly, watching our banter. Filia really did look at Ashley like a little sister.

“So, what were you talkin’ about?” I asked.

“Ashley told me about a festival in her home village. She invited me to come.”

A festival, huh? “That sounds good! You should go.”

There are times when you just want to cut loose, ya know? She needed to have fun in her life. I didn’t intend to try to stop her from getting it. Even if we were partners, I didn’t want us to be joined at the hip or anything.

“Why don’t you come too, Yuri?” asked Filia.

Huh. I hadn’t expected that. A festival... Had I ever even been to a festival? I couldn’t remember anything like one. “Uh, sure, I suppose doin’ something like this once in a while could be fun.”

Maybe I’d find something at the festival that could make me

stronger. You can't get strong without going everywhere and doing everything. You gotta be voracious!

"Are you coming too, Yuri?" asked Ashley.

"Guessing you don't want me to?"

"No, I don't mind at all," she said. "The more people come to a festival, the more fun it is."

I was a little surprised by that. I mean, I'd thought that would've been against the idea, but...

Ashley suddenly frowned, as if she understood my feelings. She turned her face away from me. "I don't dislike you or anything, Yuri. I think of you as my friend."

"I see. Thank you, Ashley." Ashley was a little bit headstrong, but she was just a thirteen-year-old girl. I couldn't bring myself to poke fun at something she'd mustered up the courage to say. "You know, somethin' tells me you and I are gonna get along just fine."

"Hmph, w-well!" Ashley stammered. "I don't think so."

"Way to be a tsundere."

"H-hey! Shut up!"

"Yes, I have been simply certain that you two would get along swimmingly," said Filia, just as happy-go-lucky as ever. "Yuri, Ashley...I suppose my intuition was correct."

Well, if I could get along with Ashley, that was good enough for me. "When do we set out for your village, Ashley?"

Ashley began to count on her fingers. "If we take the Earth Dragon Bus, we could get there in a day, even accounting for breaks. I'd like to get there before the day of the festival, so...three days would be good. Is that okay, Sis?"

"Yes, that works quite well," said Filia.

"Cool," I said. "Wanna go and handle a request before we go, Filia?"

Filia nodded. "Sounds fine to me. We'll go out early in the morning tomorrow and see if there's anything suitable."

With our plans decided, I got up to go clean myself off in the shower—but I'd hardly taken a step before the high-pitched cry of a

child rang in my ear.

“I-I’d like to come along to help with the request too. Is that okay?”

It was Ashley, of course. Ashley had been clinging to Filia all the time lately, so it wasn’t exactly odd that she wanted to come with us.

“Sure, you can tag along.”

Finding out just what the youngest S-Rank ever was truly capable of couldn’t hurt, you know? After all, fighting a duel is totally different from fighting monsters.

Ashley’s eyes lit up. “I’ll go get ready!” she cried, and ran out of the room.

“She’s awfully restless, huh,” I said, smiling wryly.

Filia beamed. “Tee hee! Yes, she is.” I wondered if she was happy that Ashley and I were finally growing closer. Which reminded me— Ashley was going to be tackling a request with us, so it seemed to me it’d be an opportunity to test out my brand spanking new skill while we were at it.

Fresh out of the oven, it was time for a glorious debut! It was the first time I’d be using it in actual combat, so my heart was pounding!

My indoor training got even more intense that day. In the blink of an eye, day stretched into the late night.

There was a quiet knock at the door in the morning. When I opened it, a young girl clad entirely in red clothes was standing there.

“Oh, hey, Ashley. You’re awfully early.”

“I-I was so excited that I couldn’t sleep. I suppose it’s better than being late, right?” Ashley said bashfully.

Oh, we’d totally forgotten to specify the time, hadn’t we? Anyway, seeing Ashley, who was normally so fiercely determined, bashfully squirming around like that, it was so...so...!

“Adorable!”

“Knock it off!”

“All right, let’s go wake up Filia.” I welcomed Ashley inside, pointed her in the direction of Filia’s bed, and Ashley’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh? Big Sis is still sleeping?”

“Yeah. She’s not really a morning person.” It was happening less and less now, but for a time, she’d slept in almost every day. I wondered how Ashley, who idolized Filia so much, would take it. But just as I thought that, I realized Ashley was...gone?

As soon as she’d heard me, Ashly darted over to the bed at high speed like some kind of lightning-fast beast of the plains.

“Eh he he! Aww, the face of Big Sis when she’s sleeping!”

If she were anywhere near normal, Ashley would have been quite a cute kid. What a pity. “Don’t do anything weird, okay?”

“I won’t! It just makes me happy to look at her, is all. Besides, it’s not weird feelings or anything. It’s just that when I look at Big Sis, I... get this feeling? Like, wow! You know what I mean, right?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Our voices must’ve been like a wake-up call, because Filia started to squirm around. As usual, Filia was in a daze in the mornings. It was a little funny to see her like that, because she was normally so precise.

“Good morning...huh? Ashley, you’re here?”

“Ooooooh! Sis, you’re just way too cute!” Ashley exclaimed, hugging Filia. Dazed, Filia accepted the hug.

“We’ll go when you’re ready,” I told her.

“Ah, okay,” replied Filia sleepily.

We headed over to the guild and checked the bulletin board. At the sight of us, people in the guild started talking.

“Whoa, check it out! Did that guy seriously tame Ashley the Flame Princess?!”

“Come on... What’s the difference between me and him, anyway?!”

“What’s so great about that musclebound jerk, huh?!”

The commentary brigade was as annoying as ever. If they had the

time to spout stupid nonsense, it'd be better spent training their muscles. I was standing on my tiptoes at that very moment, developing my sense of balance while simultaneously strengthening my calves. Really, didn't they know the old proverb, *Every little bit of muscle means more muscle*?

"Um, it's not like they don't know it," said Filia, clearly peeking into my mind. "It's more like there is no such proverb."

I pretended that I didn't hear her and studied the bulletin board. Requests of varying scope and danger were posted to the board, and adventurers could choose to accept any that they liked.

"Hey, how 'bout this one? 'Defeat the Water Dragon,'" said Ashley, standing up tall and pointing to a request posted at the edge of the bulletin board.

I quickly rejected it. "No good."

"Why? Big Sis would want to do this one too, wouldn't she?"

"Filia and I are A-Rank. We can't take on that request in the first place. The location is rank-restricted."

The 'Defeat the Water Dragon' request itself was A-Rank, but the location was only accessible to S-Rank adventurers. The guild rules stated that adventurers couldn't take on requests if they didn't meet rank requirements. It helped the guild prevent any unnecessary deaths.

Still... I desperately tried to bury my true feelings. *The Water Dragon... I wanna fight it...*

Things like dragons were probably strong, right? Yeah, of course they were! Ugh, why was I still A-Rank?!

"Oh, that's right," said Ashley. "You two are so strong that I forgot you weren't S-Rank. I guess the guild just doesn't have a discerning eye for talent."

"Exactly!" I nodded.

We were getting along unusually well, huh?

"Hey, you two..." muttered Filia, exasperated as she put a hand to her head. "You do know we're inside the guild, right?"

Course we knew. It didn't matter where we were, I was going to say what I wanted to say.

"Oh, how about this one?" Filia tore a piece of paper off the

bulletin board to show us.

“Vermin Extermination: Gorillalas,” I read.

“That one should be okay, right?” asked Filia. “I’m pretty sure gorillalas are higher B-Rank monsters.”

Yeah, it could be a great way for me to break in my new technique...

“Ha! With me there, we’ll handle them easy. It’ll be no contest,” said Ashley, flashing a perfect white-toothed grin.

“Shall we get on with it, then?” said Filia.

We went over to submit the request to the receptionist, then headed over to the request location.

“Huh? You’re going to run there?” asked Ashley. “You’re joking, right?”

“Uh, what? Of course I’m gonna run!”

What was she even talking about? I had no idea what Ashley was trying to say. Frankly, she was getting a little hysterical. I looked over toward Filia.

“For a second, Yuri’s words sounded perfectly natural to my ears,” said Filia with a shudder. She hugged herself. “Ugh, I’m slowly turning into you!”

“Don’t talk like that!” C’mon, she was gonna give people the wrong idea!

“This seems like the place.”

After nearly four hours of running, with some breaks, we arrived at the village in question.

Huffing, Ashley hung her head and braced her hands on her knees. Her shoulders rose up and down with her heaving breaths. Filia, slightly out of breath herself, gave Ashley a worried look.

“Are you all right, Ashley?”

“Y-yeah, I’m okay.”

“That’s why I offered to carry ya,” I said.

“I don’t...need...your help!”

“Gotta say, I admire your willpower.” If you want to get stronger, after all, it’s better to be competitive. Feeling that “Aw, damn it, come on!” moment is surprisingly important. It’s good motivation!

“It’s not like I want your approval or anything. I just wouldn’t be able to forgive myself for giving up halfway through and relying on someone else...” Ashley looked up at me. “But we’re late because of me. I really am sorry for that.”

It was certainly true that Ashley had slowed us down a little. Even so, it must have been really hard for her, since she didn’t usually rush. For the whole trip, she never once complained. Deep down, I was also seeing her in a better light.

“Ashley, you really gave it your all, didn’t you?” said Filia.

“Yep!” Ashley replied as Filia cast recovery magic on her. A light white enveloped Ashley’s form. “Oh! I feel so much better now! Thank you, Big Sis!”

“You’re welcome.” Filia bent down and smiled, making eye contact with Ashley.

After we took a short break for Ashley’s sake, we headed into the village. It really was the quintessential village, being so rural. The fields covered a wide expanse of the local territory; I could definitely see how vermin would be a serious problem if left unchecked. We explained to some nearby villagers that we’d come to answer their request, and they led us to the village chief’s house.

“Oh, thank you for coming.” The village chief, a seemingly good-natured man, looked to be in his seventies. We sat down and started off with some small talk. I typically left that stuff to Filia, but since Ashley was also engaging in small talk this time too, I felt a little alienated. If the topic had been muscles, I could definitely have jumped in, but alas.

Unfortunately, topics like “How can I build up even more beautiful muscles?” didn’t often come up in everyday conversation. Why weren’t more people worried about that? What a strange world we lived in.

Finally, the pleasantries ended, and the topic shifted to the actual matter of the request.

“How often do the gorillalas come to this village?” asked Filia.

“They come every night,” the chief replied. “Ten of them. They’ve been devastating the village’s crops...”

Every night? That sounded awful. But we were gonna stop it right away! “Is there someplace in particular where they show up often?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

We asked the village chief to show us the spot, then took up position at the edge of the fields. There, we waited until nightfall...

“Ook! Ook!”

Multiple low, deep animal cries overlapped one another in the dark of night. Then, under the light of a full moon, the beast appeared. It looked like a gorilla combined with another gorilla. Basically, it was twice the size of a regular gorilla, hence the name: the gorillala was two gorillas put together. I could get behind that kinda logic.

“They finally showed up.” I was feeling pretty relieved about that. They’d come much later in the night than expected, and I’d even started to fear they weren’t coming.

“I was getting really tired of waiting,” said Ashley.

“I know, I was gonna start yawning any second. Right, Filia?”

“You two sure are energetic...” Filia said sleepily. I knew Filia was the sort who needed a lot of sleep, but I couldn’t help but wonder who was the weird one here. I mean, Ashley was so lively and Filia looked like a limp noodle.

Wasn’t important. We had gorillalas to deal with.

“Six, eight...ten,” I counted. “Just like the chief said.”

“They seem to be quite capable at commanding illusions,” said Filia, a serious look on her face.

“Illusions? What kind of illusions?” I asked.

I hadn’t noticed any such thing at all. If they were able to use illusions that even I couldn’t notice, I’d really have to brace myself.

“They’re turning into you, Yuri,” said Filia seriously. “Their illusions are so incredibly elaborate. I can’t even tell you apart...”

“Uh, what do they look like?” I asked.

“Gorillas.”

“That’s not an illusion. That’s real.” Plus, my muscles were many, many times more beautiful than the ones on these guys. The difference was obvious!

“It’s a preemptive strike!” shouted Ashley, firing off a flaming arrow. “Just because you look like Yuri doesn’t mean that I’m gonna go easy on you!”

The arrow pierced one of the gorillalas and the thing went limp.

A gorillala that, by the way, looked absolutely nothing like me. Okay? *Okay?*

“Ook!”

The gorillalas got all worked up now that one of their friends had been killed, and they started blasting us with earth magic. Earthen bullets erupted from their mouths.

“Not a chance!” Ashley shouted, summoning a wall of flame in front of herself. The earthen bullets collided with the roaring flames and instantly turned to black carbon, crumbling and falling to the ground in pieces. Good stuff. Just what you’d expect from an S-Rank.

Beside her, Filia had finally snapped out of her sleepiness. She called the Wind God to chop the earthen bullets to crumbs with incredibly deft maneuvers. She was getting even better at handling that ability.

Wait, I couldn’t just watch them fight!

“Hmph!” I repelled the earthen bullets with my fist, knocking them back at the gorillalas. One of them fell to the ground.

“It’s gonna start raining down from the sky any minute now!” shouted Ashley. “I’m using my lightning magic to activate Infinite Flame! Eat this!” Ashley’s lightning magic flew at considerable speed, and no gorillala could dream of dodging her attack—but that wasn’t the end of it.

“Ook?!”

The other gorillalas around her target shouted in surprise. After the gorillala was hit by Ashley’s lightning magic, its body ignited and turned into a huge fireball. I’d seen this when we fought before. Ashley’s ability, Infinite Flame, allowed her to add a fire aspect to all

other types of magic as an additional effect. It was a pretty interesting ability, allowing her to automatically deal an additional damage with fire, no matter what kind of magic she used first.

“He he!” Ashley grinned smugly.

“I’m not gonna lose either!” I turned from Ashley and observed the gorillalas. In almost no time, their numbers had dwindled down to seven. They charged us, half from desperation, but I couldn’t say that was necessarily a bad choice. If their huge bodies collided with Filia or Ashley, they probably wouldn’t be able to withstand it—if the monsters actually hit them.

“Let’s go!” I focused my power in my brain. They say that normally, human beings only use 20 or 30 percent of their brains. So what happened if we used 100 percent? After removing the limiter from my own brain, I focused on my heart. The heart muscle is, by nature, an involuntary muscle. You can’t move it through willpower. Most people can’t, anyway.

I used my willpower to make my heart pump how I wanted. It pounded at an absurd rate, carrying blood through my body at an order of magnitude faster than usual. Generally, for living things, the faster its heart rate, the more agile it is. By making my heart beat faster through force of will, I managed to rapidly increase my agility. It took me three seconds to get into this mode. Against a real tough opponent, that would have been far too much time. I needed to train more.

I looked over at the gorillalas charging at us. Right now, it almost looked like they were standing still.

“Hooah!” I got in close and punched. In ten seconds, the remaining seven gorillalas had lost their lives. I put the limiter back on my brain.

The technique was something of a double-edged sword. I could only keep it up for about a minute before it drained all my stamina. It definitely needed work. I had to improve my cardio even more!

“Wh-what was that just now?” Filia yelled.

“Hm? Oh, that.” Good question. I still hadn’t come up with a name for the technique. Maybe I could pick someone else’s brain about it. “It’s a technique where I remove my brain’s limiter and make myself stronger. It doesn’t have a name yet.”

“What does that even mean...?” Ashley looked confused for some reason. Come on, I’d already explained it!

“The wisest course of action,” said Filia, “is simply not to question anything about Yuri’s physical abilities.”

Filia understood that quite well. Anyway, it was time to report that we’d completed the request.

“Thank you so much. I don’t know how we can repay you,” said the village chief.

“We’ve been paid through the guild. That’s enough. Very fair.”

The village chief bowed to us repeatedly, servilely. You’d think the representative of a village would have a little more dignity. Well, I supposed I could understand why he’d want to pay respects to these wonderful muscles of mine.

“If you’ll excuse us, we’ll be going.”

“Really, thank you so much!”

After we reported that we’d completed the request, we immediately left the village. Our time was limited, and we didn’t want to waste it.

On our way back, I asked my two companions a question. “I’d still like to think of a name for that technique I used before. Got any ideas?”

All right, now was the time for them to show off their flair for cool names! I wanted to hear some good ideas.

Ashley opened her mouth to speak first. She seemed surprisingly enthusiastic. “A name for your technique? How about...Zero Burst?”

“Are...are you serious?” I asked. Wow. She didn’t even have the slightest hint of good taste in names. Honestly, I felt embarrassed just hearing it. I turned to Filia. “What about you? Got any ideas?”

“Oh, I don’t know anything about technique names. Maybe something like...hmm. Super Yuri Mode? I think that sounds super cool.”

“Filia, you’re...a genius!”

“Uh. I’m a what?”

“I’m using it!” The moment I heard that name, an electric shock

coursed through my body! She had a stupendous knack for totally sweet names!

—” Filia suddenly started panicking. “No, wait a minute. I was just jok

Well, since she’d come up with an even better name than I’d expected, she was probably going to take out the part with my name in it and replace it with her own or something, all so she could lay claim to it! But a totally sweet technique name like this, I just couldn’t let it be compromised by Filia’s shenanigans!

“Nope, I’ve already taken the name Super Yuri Mode. It’s mine now. I’m not givin’ it to anyone!”

“It’s no use,” Filia groaned. “He’s seriously going to use it.”

“Yuri, you’ve got absolutely no sense for naming things,” Ashley sighed.

“I don’t want to hear a word from *you*, Ms. Zero Burst.”

“What the heck?! Come on, that one was cool!” Filia wailed.

Wait, was Filia serious? Yikes. I felt sorry for her. In the end, my new skill was dubbed Super Yuri Mode. It was a wonderful name, perfectly fitting for the new technique.

Chapter 9: Ashley's Village and Visitors

THE DAY CAME for us to depart for Ashley's village. Ashley was standing out in front of her house, looking pretty sick of waiting for us. "You're late! We were supposed to meet thirty minutes ago!"

Ashley glared at me. Well, since she had sharp eyes, she looked kinda cool when she glared. It really fit her! It helped that she wasn't really intimidating, thanks to her small stature.

"If ya got a complaint, then tell it to Filia," I said.

"Ugh..." Filia bowed apologetically. "I'm sorry, Ashley."

We were late because Filia had overslept. Even though Filia wasn't exactly a morning person, she still didn't sleep in much these days.

"Oh, Big Sis, it was because of you?" Ashley shook her head. "In that case, don't worry about it at all!" The moment Ashley knew it was all Filia's fault, her mood immediately improved. The intense glare from before vanished and she grinned happily. Jeez, she really liked Filia.

"I'll go ahead and call the Earth Dragon Bus," said Ashley. "You two can go inside and make yourself at home in the meantime."

It looked like a pretty nice place from outside, with a red roof and walls that really stood out.

"Huh. Is Jeepupp your home?" I asked.

"Oh? No, it's not. This is a vacation home. I have one in almost every city," said Ashley.

"That's amazing, Ashley!" said Filia.

Wow, talk about being a big spender. That's what I'd expect from an S-Rank adventurer, though, and she wasn't bragging or anything. She said it like it was perfectly normal. I couldn't imagine having a vacation home when you were a kid. Looks sure could be deceiving.

"Well, come on in," said Ashley.

Filia and I followed Ashley into her house. She led us into her living room...which was *completely* red. Red ceiling, red wallpaper, red

furniture. Everything, red.

“This is amazin’.”

“It’s quite cute, isn’t it?”

“I know, right?” said Ashley, practically bouncing off the walls from Filia’s compliment. “I’m really proud of it!”

Wait, this room was cute? Would our room be cute too if we painted it red?

“Let’s see...” Ashley muttered, fiddling with some kind of flat rectangular item she was holding in her hand, the edges of which extended beyond her palm. “All right, our Earth Dragon Bus will be here in a few minutes. I just sent them a message via Ring Ring.”

“Ring Ring? What’s that?”

“Oh, you don’t know? It’s a magical tool that delivers messages to people far away.” Ashley showed us the red item in her hand.

“Goodness, I’d never heard of such a useful tool!” Filia exclaimed.

“Wow. Yeah, me neither,” I said.

We peered at Ashley’s Ring Ring with great interest.

“Yuri aside, I guess if *you* don’t know about it, Big Sis, then that means it hasn’t really caught on much around here yet. But I think it definitely will soon. Sending a message to someone far away is so convenient!”

It certainly seemed like it would have a lot of use. Society was steadily becoming more and more convenient. A few minutes later, the three of us boarded the Earth Dragon Bus, and we set off for Ashley’s home village.

The afternoon of the following day, we arrived at Ashley’s home village. After wending down a few tranquil village roads, the Earth Dragon Bus stopped in front of Ashley’s house.

“Whew, we’re here! Sis, Yuri, you can leave your bags in your room,” said Ashley, while unlocking the door and letting us into her house.

When we followed in after her, we were greeted by the sight of a bright red hallway. Down that hallway, we were greeted by the sight of yet another bright red room. The various pieces of furniture were of a different style from what Ashley had in her house in Jeepupp, but everything was still red. The whole deal was so coordinated around that one color that it frankly astounded me.

“You really love the color red, huh.”

“Well, yeah. It’s my image color.”

Image color? Was that even a thing? Well, I was already sick and tired of it. I wanted to see a different color already. I hadn’t even known you could get fed up with a color, yet there I was.

“Big Sis, how about this room? Big Sis?!”

“I-I feel sick...” Filia squatted down, holding her hand over her mouth.

I rubbed her back, but it didn’t seem like she was feeling any better. “What’s wrong, Filia? Are you okay?”

“I-I don’t know. I’ve been feeling sick ever since we rode on the Earth Dragon Bus...”

“No way. Big Sis, was that the first time you’ve ever ridden on an Earth Dragon Bus?!”

Filia nodded slowly.

At that, Ashley put her palm to her mouth in shock. “I heard that sometimes people get sick riding the Earth Dragon Bus before they get used to it. The roads we were on yesterday were fine, but the roads today aren’t as well-maintained, so...I...I’m sorry! I never imagined that you hadn’t ridden it before!”

“I-It’s okay. R-really, I’m all right...” Filia wobbled around unsteadily. Her complexion was horrible.

“You don’t look all right at all,” I muttered.

Filia responded by casting recovery magic on herself, and a white light enveloped her body. When the light disappeared, Filia’s complexion had greatly improved, and she looked much closer to normal. “Whew! I think I’m all right now, more or less. I’ve used up all of my magic, though.”

“I-I’m sorry...” Ashley said despondently, hanging her head low.

Filia shook her head and gently stroked Ashley's velvety-soft red hair. "It's okay. Really, I'm all right. You're very considerate of other people's feelings, Ashley. You're a kind person."

"Big Sis...!"

"But I'm surprised that you're completely fine, Yuri," said Filia.

"Hey, don't underestimate me. After all, I've trained my vestibular system. A little bit of shaking's not gonna have any effect on my buffed out semicircular canals."

Filia looked visibly exasperated at that. Hmm... Maybe...she wanted to touch my muscles?

"All right, all right. Here, you can touch 'em." I rolled up my sleeves and offered my arm to Filia.

"What a preposterously irrelevant show of consideration," muttered Filia.

"Yuri...in a way, you're pretty amazing."

I didn't really get why, but Ashley had complimented me. Yay!

Once Filia had fully recovered, we went outside, where we met a landscape completely different from Jeepupp. The houses were constructed in similar fashion, but the village roads were wider. The sun blazed overhead, its rays beating down on us.

"All right," Ashley announced, "I'm going to head to the village square. Big Sis, come with me!"

"Will do. I'm looking forward to seeing the village where you grew up, Ashley."

"In that case, I'm just gonna wander around." I said. I was thinking I'd take a look around the village. But as I was planning my first destination, Filia frowned.

"If you're out by yourself, Yuri, won't people think you're suspicious?"

"Ah..." Ashley's brow furrowed. "Well, in this village people are kind of homebodies, and you're right, outsiders really stand out here. With how he looks, he'll stand out even more... Okay, let's take Yuri along with us."

Who could ever be suspicious of such attractive muscles? I wasn't entirely convinced, but I wasn't about to risk causing a scene in Ashley's hometown. I supposed I didn't have a choice. I decided to just quietly tag along.

As we made our way to the village square, we saw people gathering up ahead—not too many, but enough to actually constitute a proper village, more or less.

One of the people, a young man, grinned when he saw us. “Oh, you're back, Ashley. It's been a long time.”

He looked like he was in his early twenties and had a headband tied around his head. He gave off the vibe of a guy who really got into his festivals.

“Of course I'm going to come back for the festival, you know?” said Ashley.

“You really love it, huh?” The young man looked over at us. He had a bright smile on his face, and he looked well-suited for such a sunny place. He was slender, but more muscular than the magic-using adventurers from the guild, so he still had a bit of bulk to him. There wasn't an abundance of magicians out here, so there were doubtless more opportunities for physical labor than there were in the city. Either way, I always appreciated another well-trained body.

“And who are these people with you?” asked the young man.

Ashley began to introduce us, looking pretty proud. “This is Filia! She's like my super cute big sister!”

“Nice to meet you,” said the young man.

Filia bowed her head slightly.

Meanwhile, I snorted. *What a careless introduction. Well, I suppose no introduction can really say everything about someone, huh?*

“This is Yuri,” Ashley went on. “He's crazy about muscles.”

“Nice...to meet you?” said the young man.

Hey, that was a little mean, right? I wasn't crazy. I was just very serious about muscle.

“Oh, by the way, name's Moichi. Nice to meet the two of ya! I know this is a pretty nowhere village, but I hope you enjoy yourselves. And hey, it's great to hear that you managed to make a friend, Ashley!”

Moichi ruffled Ashley's head, playfully mussing her hair.

Ashley didn't seem to dislike it, exactly. "H-hey, I'm pretty popular, okay?! Of course I'd make some friends!"

"She's pretty prideful," said Moichi, "but she's a good girl at heart, y'know? I hope y'all get along."

"Hey, that's uncalled for!" Ashley protested.

Moichi quickly apologized to her with a look that suggested he really didn't mean offense. Somehow, just from that, I could tell that she'd been raised with great care in this village.

"I think of Ashley like my own little sister," said Filia, smiling sweetly at Ashley. "She's so cute!"

"Big Sis..." Ashley's eyes welled with happy tears as she gazed at Filia's beautiful smile. Moichi himself seemed entranced as he looked at her. Even I felt my heart pound for a moment.

"O-oh yeah, that reminds me," said Moichi, regaining his composure. "Our village festival is really famous for somethin'. Let me show it to you guys ahead of time. Follow me!"

He quickly and unobtrusively changed the topic, trying to divert our attention from his embarrassment over being so thoroughly charmed. Still, we were pretty interested, so we followed along.

"The first time you see it, you're going to be so amazed," said Ashley.

"Yeah, it's specially made right here in this village," said Mochi.

I couldn't even imagine what Moichi and Ashley were talking about. I barely knew anything about what this festival even celebrated in the first place.

"All right, if we turn the corner, then...there, look!" said Moichi.

"It's amazing, isn't it?!" exclaimed Ashley.

Moichi and Ashley both sounded so proud.

"That's..."

"It really is amazing'."

It really *was* amazing. A massive flame burning in the shape of a human body stood about thirty feet tall. Even though it was made of fire, it was elaborately constructed, down to the most minute details. If

not for the flickering, you could have easily mistaken it for a giant human being at first glance. In a sense, it resembled Filia's Wind God. Or, it was a like a fire version of the Wind God. Like a...Fire God?

"A lot of other villages have pared down the process and just made the image of the Fire God on the day of the festival, but not our village. We keep the flame going for a month. During that time, we make small adjustments here and there to our idol. Compared to the Fire God idols in other village festivals, ours is *much* better. Whaddya think, huh? Surprised?"

So, it was a Fire God after all. I supposed that if they kept it going for a month, the degree of detail made sense.

"Moichi, *I* was going to tell them all that stuff!" said Ashley.

"Oh, my bad."

"But I'm assuming you must have other work to do too, right?" said Filia. "You must be deeply religious, keeping the flame from going out for a whole month."

Yeah, seriously. The cost-benefit analysis for keeping this thing going seemed way off, and...wait, what? That thought seemed pretty intellectual! I guessed I shouldn't have been *too* surprised, though, being an intellectual muscle man.

"Oh, it's not like that, Big Sis. We all just love partying. Of course, we do still worship the Fire God."

"Yeah, that's basically the way things are here. In our village, everyone loves to come out and celebrate. Even the grandpas and grandmas come out! Around this time, people forget about their work and just prepare for the festival," Moichi said with a grin. But his pleasant smile gradually began to fade. "But, uh, this year, I can't really even think about the festival much."

"What do you mean, Moichi? What happened?" asked Ashley. She pressed Moichi for answers—it seemed being away from home had left her out of the loop.

Moichi hesitated for a moment. "It's...hard for me to tell ya this, but we got word that there'd be an attack on our shop."

"An...an attack?!"

"Yeah. I thought I'd try and keep it from you, since you'd probably worry, but I figured you'd probably get angry if I did that. I'll

tell you everything.”

This morning, Moichi had found a letter in the store mailbox. The white paper had been sealed with wax, and the words “To the shopkeeper” had been written on the envelope. Moichi had thought it strange that the sender’s name wasn’t on the letter, but he’d gone ahead and opened it.

Inside he’d found one sheet of paper with a message on it: “This shop shouldn’t exist. Tonight, when the full moon shines in the night sky, I will come to destroy it. Until that time, repent for your sins. Don’t forget—this is not the act of a vigilante, but divine punishment.”

“That can’t be...” Ashley gasped.

But Moichi showed the letter itself to Ashley, and sure enough, there were the words Moichi had told us, written in red on the white paper.

“Is that tonight?” asked Ashley.

“Yeah, I think so. But, well, it might just be a buncha kids playin’ around. I was thinkin’ that I’d stay away from the shop today just in case, but I’m not all that worried about it,” said Moichi, tucking away the letter.

Just like he’d said, he didn’t seem that worried. It was clearly still on his mind though.

“What the heck?!” Ashley shouted. “You should be taking this more seriously!” It didn’t seem like she was angry, *per se*. More that she was genuinely concerned about the safety of Moichi and his shop.

“Look at it this way: Whether I take it seriously or not, they say they’re comin’. In that case, isn’t it better to just roll with it? Don’t worry, Ashley. Nothing’s gonna happen anyway.”

“Moichi,” said Filia abruptly, “if it isn’t too much of a bother, may we guard your shop tonight?” Filia turned her silver eyes toward me. “Hey, Yuri, these people are graciously allowing us to stay in their village, so isn’t this the least we can do?”

“No, no, you got it all wrong, Filia. ‘The least we can do?’ You mean ‘we *gotta* do it!’” I said firmly.

Of course, all this could well be a prank. But if it wasn’t, then the culprit would be coming to Moichi’s shop. And with the way the culprit announced their arrival in advance like that...it had to be someone

strong! Besides, I wasn't so good-natured that I'd let an opponent like that slip by. I had to fight!

Moreover, as Ashley's friend, I couldn't just sit back when her village was in danger.

"Moichi, let us handle it," I said. "We'll keep your shop safe for sure!"

"Yuri is right. We're quite confident in our abilities," added Filia.

"You guys... Thank you. I'm countin' on you." Moichi held out his hand, and Filia and I took it firmly.

"Big Sis, Yuri..."

"Ashley, you got some good friends, eh? That makes me happiest of all," said Moichi, roughing up her head once again.

Ashley let him do it, then bowed to me and Filia. "Thank you, both of you. I don't know what else to say, but...thank you."

"Come on, don't talk like we're strangers," I said. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"You're a little sister to me, Ashley. I'm not about to let someone wreck something as dear to you as your village."

"Okay," said Ashley, her eyes lighting up brightly, "but I'm fighting too. This is my village. I wanna protect it myself."

"I'm not gonna stop you, but are you sure?" I asked her.

"Well, of course! I am the S-Ranked adventurer, Ashley Arisietta!" she replied, smacking her chest with a thump.

Well said. I couldn't help but smile at her. Filia and Moichi looked happy too. Ashley had spoken so confidently, after all.

Then Moichi clapped his hands together twice. "Enough with the serious stuff! Now that you've come all this way to our village, you need to have some fun!"

With that, the feeling in the air changed. Moichi was exactly right; it would have been rude for us to *not* have fun. I looked over at the Fire God idol again. Even from a distance, I could tell it was modeled with distinct facial features. It was plain to see that it required a lot of delicate work to keep it going so well.

"Can I get a closer look?" I asked Moichi, deeply interested in the

elaborate idol.

“Sure thing.”

With Moichi’s approval, Filia and Ashley and I got in closer to the blazing flame. The closer we got, the more we realized just how incredibly abnormal it was. It was definitely fire, but it seemed so *alive*. I didn’t know much about non-muscle magic, but this idol was, without a doubt, the culmination of magical wisdom. It impressed even me.

“It really is amazing. The arms are especially realistic,” said Filia in admiration. Even an elf like Filia, who knew a lot about magic, was impressed.

Ashley chuckled proudly. “I know, right? I was a kid when I first saw it, and that’s when I fell in love with the color red.”

“You’re still a kid though,” I said.

“Huh? Mentally, I’m older than you.”

Hey, hey, what the heck was that about?! She was like twelve or thirteen years old. From my perspective, that was basically a baby. I looked to Filia for her undoubtedly objective opinion. “That’s not true at all, Filia, right?”

“I suppose that if I had to judge, I’d say that Ashley is the more mature one.”

“Yay! I love you, Big Sis!”

That couldn’t be, right? I mean, did I really seem so childish? I looked over at Ashley hopping up and down. Did I look even more childish than *that*? This was shocking indeed.

“But, in terms of physical ability, I can’t lose!” I shouted, jumping into the air to relieve my frustration. I quickly shot up into the sky!

In fact, I shot up to the point where I couldn’t just see the village—no, I could see the entire area around the village in fine detail. I... might’ve jumped too high. I took a quick look around.

Just as my body began to feel the effects of gravity, I spotted something flying near the horizon.

“What is that?”

I didn’t even have to strain my eyes to see there was something flying my way at breakneck speed. From the looks of it, it seemed like a creature. A humanoid one, at that.

“What should I do?” I muttered.

I hesitated for a few moments, thinking about letting out a roar to see if whatever was coming had the will to fight. If it was an enemy, that’d be great...but if it was just someone in a hurry, I’d just startle them. As I wondered, the figure drew closer.

Ah, forget it. I’d just roar as loud as I could. If it wasn’t an enemy, I’d apologize later.

But when the figure was just a hundred feet away from me, it abruptly changed course and streaked down, landing in Ashley’s village.

“Whew,” I said to myself, “that was a close one.”

Still, I broke out in a cold sweat. There was absolutely no murderous intent emanating from the figure; it was probably just a villager or something, and I’d almost attacked whoever it was by mistake. That had been a close call.

“But...huh? Wait, did I make a mistake?”

Something was wrong. The villagers were running away as fast as their legs could carry them, like they were trying to escape from that new figure. That figure headed toward the Fire God idol, and Filia and Ashley stood in front of it to block the way.

Wait, was this the person who was gonna attack Moichi’s shop? Bad thoughts popped into my mind, and I hurriedly kicked through the air to head back to the ground—though, irritatingly enough, I couldn’t get much speed in the air.

By the time I somehow managed to land on the ground near the Fire God idol, the figure was about sixty feet or so away.

“Ashley, is that someone from the village?” I asked.

“No, you can tell just by looking! Those horns... It’s a majin.”

There were definitely two small horns growing out of the figure’s head. And their skin was the same shade as Bezegamoth’s. However, this one looked like a little girl. She was even smaller than Ashley. She had brown skin and long, richly blonde hair. Her eyes were clear and blue, and she was dressed from head to toe in a Gothic Lolita outfit.

So this was why people were running away. Now I knew. A majin was a symbol of great power...and of great terror. They were like living natural disasters; it would’ve been stranger if people *didn’t* run.

“Wow, this is awesome!” the majin cooed. “I mean, it was already amazing even from up above, but it’s even more awesome seeing it from up close!” The majin approached the figure of the Fire God, almost as if she didn’t care one bit about the villagers fleeing in terror. For that matter, she didn’t seem to care about us either, even as we stood on high alert.

“Hey, you!” shouted Ashley, stopping the majin in her tracks. “Don’t come any closer!”

However, the majin puffed up her cheeks indignantly and shouted back at her. Her voice was shrill and lingering. “Why? *You’re* close to it! Why am I, Loli Loli, the only one who can’t see it?”

“Because you’re a majin!” shouted Ashley. “If you come any closer to the pride of our village, you’re going to regret it!”

For a moment, the majin Loli Loli looked at the ground. Her fists shook. Then, she looked back up and shouted in a voice so loud that it echoed throughout the entire village.

“You people...are so *rude*! Always calling me majin this, majin that. My name is Loli Loli Lukis Isarett, thank you very muchly, and *you* are all so *rude*! Such *rude* people!” Loli Loli took one step closer—

And flames blasted her. “I’m not interested in your name!” Ashley shouted. “You’re a majin. I won’t allow you to terrorize everyone in the village, and don’t you dare lay your hands on the Fire God!”

Ashley looked back at Filia and me.

Hey, hey! I thought. Don’t take your eyes off your enemy in the middle of a fight!

“Big Sis, Yuri, please don’t get involved in this.”

“But your opponent is a majin,” said Filia. “Even if she’s little, taking it on by yourself is...”

“I’m sorry, but please,” said Ashley. “I’m an S-rank, and I’m going to protect my own village.”

Ashley didn’t listen to Filia’s warning. I had a feeling it had to do with pride—pride in her own power, pride in not relying on Filia and me—even though she looked like she was breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Do whatever you want,” I said. Honestly, I didn’t really like the idea of fighting someone like Rolly Rolly or whatever she called herself.

“How dare you?!” Loli Loli snarled. Despite getting completely slammed by Ashley’s fire magic, Loli Loli was completely unharmed. Majin were just way more physically durable than humans.

“I’m your opponent,” said Ashley. “Are you going to come at me or not?”

Ashley and Loli Loli faced one another. They were both short in stature. To an average person, this might have looked like a fight between children, but to the trained eye, it was clear they were both uncommonly talented. Only a small number of people could ever hope to win against either of them, including adults.

The villagers fled. The two girls stood motionless. You could have cut the tension with a knife.

Ashley was the first to make a move. She created eight spears of flame behind her and launched them.

“Whoa, that’s amazing!” shouted Loli Loli, surprised. But a moment later, Loli Loli manifested a shield of ice in front of her. All eight spears hit the shield, and all eight left the shield intact. “But I, Loli Loli, am even more amazing! My ability, Absolute Zero, is *super* amazing!” she boasted, hands on her hips.

“Are you making fun of me?!” Ashley snarled, furious. “Wait a minute, could you be the person who threatened to attack Moichi’s shop?!”

“What are you talking about?! Don’t say stuff that’s hard for Loli Loli to understand!”

For some reason, I was starting to feel a bit of a kinship with this Loli Loli. But for Ashley, an answer that wasn’t really an answer at all just wasn’t good enough. Even if she was an S-Rank, staying calm in the face of a powerful foe while her fellow villagers were in danger was next to impossible.

“All right,” said Ashley, her pupils dilating. “Let’s get dangerous. Infinite Flame!”

Chapter 10:

People Who Don't Build Walls Tend to Get Along with Others Easily

AS ASHLEY UNLEASHED her ability, the temperature skyrocketed.

The heat rising from her small frame distorted the air around her.

“What the heck?! It’s getting hotter!” shouted Loli Loli. She looked around in a circle, bewildered, her black skirt fluttering in the wind. “Is this that global warming thingy?!”

“I don’t think you can afford to look the other way,” said Ashley, and she unleashed water magic. The spell was wide, thin, and dome-shaped. It was probably intended to cover her target.

But Loli Loli held her hand aloft and froze that water magic. It was like she’d shot cold air from her hands.

“Not! Over! Yet!” Ashley roared. Flames erupted from the frozen water and flew right at Loli Loli. That was her Infinite Flame for you. Whew, that ability sure was strong. It was like a two-hit combo that didn’t even take any setup.

“Go away! Go away! Shoo!” Loli Loli shouted, waving her hands around. Her shield of ice manifested at once, blocking the flames.

Meanwhile, Ashley carefully studied her opponent. I could feel the heat from her power even where I stood.

“Nothing will work against me!” shouted Loli Loli. “Do you know why? Because I’m the strongest!” She summoned a block of ice from thin air and flung it at Ashley.

Ashley answered by raising her right arm. “Eat this!”

Ashley’s flames rapidly grew in size and erupted high into the sky. Then she swung her arm down—it was a flaming sword now. With a single swing, she easily melted the ice block. And now her flaming sword arm was headed right for Loli Loli.

“Wha—hot, hot, hot!” Loli Loli lit up. Ashley’s flames spread across her body.

“Once more!” Ashley howled. She slashed at Loli Loli with her

flaming sword, going at her with a horizontal swing. The way she attacked without hesitation, that really moved me. The worst thing you can do is leave the job half-finished when trying to finish off your foe. That just makes your opponent want to die.

Beside me, Filia let out a relieved sigh. The intensity of the fight was getting to her; she seemed exhausted. But now it looked like Ashley had won. When Filia noticed I was looking at her, she smiled weakly.

“I was so anxious,” she said. “I felt like I was on the edge of my seat...”

“It’s not over yet,” I replied.

“Wh—oh!”

Even though Filia could analyze things via Clairvoyance, she’d still lost her composure. Whenever I’m fighting, I remain calm, but Filia always seems to have a hard time watching people fight. As for me, I can follow the flow of battle via intuition.

Ashley’s onslaught had continued, but Loli Loli’s vital signs were still there. And then, suddenly, the flaming sword with which Ashley had been slashing away froze solid. Along with Ashley’s right arm.

“Wh-what?!” Panicked, Ashley used her flames to melt the ice and pulled her arm free.

Loli Loli stepped out of the steam, an audacious smile on her face. “You’re strong! This is starting to get fun! All right! Time to get serious!”



“What? You weren’t serious before?” Ashley was flustered. Loli Loli’s eyes took on an icy sheen, and cold air started to radiate from her. The temperature plummeted.

Man, the poor temperature. Had to be exhausting, going up and down like that so rapidly.

“Here I go!” shouted Loli Loli.

Loli Loli launched a palm-sized block of ice at Ashley. Ashley raised her flame shield, but the ice block grew plantlike stalks that stretched out, crashing against the shield and dousing the flames. Ashley’s Infinite Flame summoned more fire, but every new flame disappeared after colliding with the ever-growing ice stalks. The block of ice itself continued to close in on Ashley until she was unarmed.

“It’s not over! I...I can’t lose!” Ashley rolled, dodging the ice block, but she wasn’t used to dodging. She was so strong that she rarely had to practice getting out of the way, so she put too much force into the roll and spun about three times on the ground. Her opponent saw the opening and rushed in.

Loli Loli loomed over Ashley. She’d moved so fast that it probably wouldn’t have mattered if Ashley *had* dodged well. “That was fun! Let’s do it again!”

“Ugh!”

The mass of ice and a spear of flame collided—and the flame froze and shattered. The ice continued on and collided with Ashley, knocking her out cold.

Loli Loli turned to Filia and me. “Soooo, are you guys next?”

“First, let’s talk,” I said.

“Talk? What?” Loli Loli cocked her head to the side.

“Why did you come here?”

“I came to see that burning thingy. I thought it looked neat, so I came over! I saw him when I was flying through the air!”

“So you’re not planning to hurt the people in this village?”

“Loli Loli doesn’t want to attack anyone! But I was attacked, so I hit back! That’s like ‘legitimate self-defense’ or something, right?”

“You’re not thinking of attacking a store in this village or

anything, then?”

“Attacking? What store? I don’t get it. Explain, please!”

So that’s really how it was, huh? I looked to Ashley. Filia rushed over to her and healed her with recovery magic, but Ashley didn’t really have any major wounds. Her opponent had never intended to take her life at all—Loli Loli really had come here purely out of curiosity, with no intention to fight or attack the store.

I didn’t want to battle her either. I couldn’t sense any fighting spirit at all from Loli Loli, and I wasn’t about to have a match with someone who didn’t actually want to *fight*. On top of that, she was still a kid. I definitely wouldn’t want to take her life. It’d just be a waste—she still had so much time to get even stronger in the future.

“Ashley’s going to be okay,” said Filia. “Her wounds have been completely healed. She should regain consciousness in a couple hours.”

“All right.”

My guess was that Filia had peeked into Loli Loli’s mind using her Clairvoyance, because as Filia carried the unconscious Ashley on her back, I didn’t see any fear in her eyes when she looked at the majin.

I looked over at Loli Loli in front of us, dressed in her black Gothic Lolita clothes. She was even smaller than Ashley, wasn’t she? To win against our S-Ranked buddy, she really did have to be tough.

“Heyyyyy, are you listening?” asked Loli Loli. “You better not ignore me!”

“All right, I get it. Loli Loli. Let’s have a match, you and me.”

“Okay!”

An immediate answer, huh? Making snap decisions was quite the advantage on the battlefield.

“Yuri?!” Filia looked shocked. I’d definitely given her the wrong idea.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I’m not talking about a death match or anything—just a friendly competition.”

I wasn’t going to risk my life—or ask Loli Loli to risk hers—but seeing her in action as a bystander, I had felt that her power was considerable. I couldn’t help wanting to fight someone like that, if she was willing to go for it.

“Now, for the matter at hand...you got any ideas on how we should do this?”

The only thing I could think of was a duel, but I wasn’t sure I could go toe to toe with someone as strong as Loli Loli and keep a good rein on myself—I might get overenthusiastic and go for the throat.

Loli Loli thought for a moment, nodded, and clapped her hands together. “Okay, how about a race? I’m super fast! I’m so fast, you can’t even follow me with your eyes!”

“Sounds good. Oh, and Filia? Can you use your recovery magic on her?”

“Healing magic? Wow, you’re nice!”

Filia blinked. “Normally, I’d be a little skeptical, but...”

Smiling, Loli Loli extended her hand. Filia stepped back a bit, surprised. Loli Loli didn’t seem cautious at all. Maybe it was because of her strength?

“There aren’t any straight paths here,” I said, “so we’ll do it in the air.”

“Okay! I’ll fly through the sky!”

With that, I launched up through the air while Loli Loli created sparkling wings made of ice. I kicked the air again and again, gradually ascending. Loli Loli flapped her icy wings and followed. After we’d gained a certain amount of altitude, we hovered.

“How about to that tree over there?” I pointed to an isolated tree that was growing out on the plain. It was about a quarter mile away.

“Okay!”

And as for the start signal... “You start first. When I see you take off, I’ll start running.”

“Does that mean you’re giving me a handicap? Heyyyyy, wait a minute, don’t make fun of me! You’ll be sorry!” Loli Loli pulled down her eyelid and stuck out her tongue.

For a moment, I felt her power swell. Then she flapped her ice wings wide. With a massive gust of wind, Loli Loli rocketed forward at incredible speed. I watched her go—then used the air as a foothold to follow after her.

“Phew!” Loli Loli was even faster than I’d expected. Instead of

instantly closing the gap between us, she kept pulling farther and farther ahead. With those wings, it seemed like aerial combat was actually Loli Loli's specialty.

"Dang," I muttered, "she's pretty good."

I had no choice but to use my Super Yuri Mode. The gap between us had grown even greater now, since I'd focused on thinking for a few seconds. Halfway there. The gap was about two hundred feet now...

"All right!" I shouted, kicking through the air. Then I kicked, and kicked, and kicked some more! The air cracked and boomed from my kicks. Loli Loli soared on ahead without so much as glancing my way. There were only a hundred fifty to go, and I was now only a handful of feet behind.

"Hooooaaaaahhh!" I stopped kicking through the air and careened forward with my Pistol Kick. Loli Loli flapped her wings more intensely and soared through the skies.

Two figures passed over the tree—

"Dang it!" shouted Loli Loli.

That had been close! I'd managed to pass her at the very last minute. Loli Loli flew up higher in the sky as if to hide her frustration. As I looked up at her, I noticed something—something I hadn't noticed before, because I'd been so focused, but...she was flying around with such a fluffy skirt, so you could totally see her frilly panties from underneath.

Yeah, it was probably a good idea to head down to the ground ASAP.

"Hey, time to land. Hurry up."

"Huh? Ah, okay!"

I landed on the ground, Loli Loli right behind me. But it seemed her attention was still partly on the sky.

"Is there anything else? If we're finished, I'm going home," said Loli Loli. "I have work to do."

"Please wait," said Filia, stopping Loli Loli in her tracks. Filia turned to me. "I'm going to talk to the villagers to see if they'll let her participate in the festival."

"Hm. But from the looks of it, the villagers were really terrified of

her being a majin. I can't imagine it'd work. Won't talkin' to them be pointless? If we're not careful, they might kick *us* out."

I was satisfied that I'd been able to challenge a majin, but that didn't seem to be enough for Filia. On a personal level, she was so psyched to participate in the festival with Ashley that she'd stayed up late and had to sleep in. *That* had made sense to me. But when it came to this Loli Loli, they'd only just met—what did Filia want?

"But, Yuri...do you know what Loli Loli was thinking earlier? 'Again? Okay...' People have always been afraid of her, I'm certain of it. She's never once been allowed to participate in something like a festival. Don't you feel sorry for her?"

Filia's eyes glistened, reflecting the sunlight. It was the same look she'd given me after spending time with Ashley. Jeez, she really had a soft spot for kids.

Or maybe it was more that she could really put herself in Loli Loli's shoes, remembering how she'd been ignored by everyone in her village. I couldn't really fault Filia for that, you know?

When Loli Loli noticed the forlorn look on Filia's face, she trotted up to her and started patting her gently on the cheek. "What's the matter? Don't look so sad! Why are you sad? I think you should smile!"

"Ha. Yes...I see. I agree, that's a good idea." Filia smiled broadly, just as Loli Loli told her to do.

Loli Loli probably wasn't a bad person. I mean, I creeped people out all the time with my muscles, so I got where she was coming from. There was the threat of an attack on Moichi's store to deal with, and a lot of other trouble kept coming our way, but it still wouldn't have been right to abandon a kid.

"Let's wait till Ashley wakes up, then we can negotiate," I said. "We're outsiders, so we can't just do whatever we want."

"Yuri!"

"This is your responsibility, Filia, and I do respect your opinion. But remember, Ashley just got wounded, and we have no idea how she'll feel about all of this."

Ashley was the one who'd attacked Loli Loli first, but it was clear from everyone's reaction—not just that of the villagers, but those of Filia and Ashley—that all majin were seen as highly dangerous. We

understood why people had reacted that way, even if it seemed ridiculous to Loli Loli. To be fair, she'd been attacked just for showing up.

"What? What's going on?" asked Loli Loli.

"We were talking about giving you a chance to experience a fun event, something you've never gotten a chance to participate in before."

"Huh?" Loli Loli's cheeks twitched for a moment, then she had a puzzled look on her face, and then, finally, she looked a little miffed. "Okay, this has been bothering me for a while now. Don't call me 'you'! It's 'Loli Loli' or nothin'!"

"Gotcha. So we'll hide Loli Loli in Ashley's house for the time being. Get in there."

With that, I took the bag of holding from my waist and pulled out a traveling knapsack. Since you couldn't carry living things in a bag of holding, a knapsack like this was incredibly handy when you needed to catch a living thing for a request. This particular knapsack was some real top-of-the-line equipment, which meant it could hold loads up to about a hundred kilos.

"Hey! That's Loli Loli the Great to you! I'm great and powerful, okay?!" she whined, rubbing her blonde-haired head against me. Wait a minute, was she trying to poke me with her horns? The horns were way too tiny, so I couldn't really tell.

"I'm not callin' you that until you get stronger than me. Now come on, into the knapsack!"

"What the heck is this?! I-Is this, um, *that*?! Are you stealing me away to a secret hideout?!"

"Yep. Hurry and get in."

"Whoa! It's pitch dark! Ah ha ha, it's dark, it's so dark!" Just like that, Loli Loli switched gears again, and her excitement was at its absolute peak. Talking to her was so exhausting. It made me feel like I was the crazy one.

A few moments after Yuri and the gang rushed to Ashley's house,

Ashley regained consciousness. The way her red eyes fluttered open, coupled with her small stature, made her look like a tiny animal. “Uhh? I...”

“Good morning, Ashley,” said Filia, rubbing Ashley’s shoulder gently. “I’m sorry about this.”

Filia’s actions were so fluid and natural that Ashley was completely at her mercy. “Huh? H-hey, Big Sis?!”

“Okay, there don’t seem to be any problems, thank goodness!” Filia had such a carefree smile on her face.

When Ashley saw that, she realized that Filia had just been genuinely worried about her. “Ah...o-oh, *that’s* what you were doing! I was a little shocked.”

“Huh? What did you think I was d—” The moment Filia read Ashley’s mind, her face turned the color of cherry blossoms. The silver-haired, rosy-cheeked elf looked for all the world like a painting. “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to do that!” she stammered, waving her hands to hide her pale face.

Ashley realized that Filia had peeked into her mind and flopped face down on the bed in sheer mortification. “Eek! I’m so embarrassed!” she wailed, her twin tails swaying around as she kicked her legs up and down.

This was going to put a damper on their conversations for a bit.

Weird. There were loud voices coming from inside Ashley’s bedroom. After Filia had gone to make sure Ashley was okay, we were going to explain the situation with Loli Loli, but now there were all these weird sounds coming through the door. Like “I’m sorry” or “I’m so embarrassed”...

“Hey, is it all right if I come in now?” I asked.

“Uh, ah! P-please wait just a minute!” Filia shouted in a panicked voice.

Aw, man... Filia was concerned that Ashley might be confused if she found Loli Loli in her house without an explanation, so I’d been

waiting in the living room with Loli Loli. Just the two of us. Yeah. It was bumming me out. I wasn't really good with kids. They had a habit of crying when they saw my face.

Loli Loli held my hand tightly though, swaying back and forth. Man, her hands were tiny. They were the color of burnt amber. As I examined her hand, she looked up at my face with the sudden shock of an animal.

“Whoa, Yuri! Your hands are huge!”

“Ah, yeah. It's a result of my training.” When I had grown to my current size, I had learned how to change the size of my hands at will. Even though the person I was talking with right now was a child, I guessed I could be happy for the praise? Still, I was taking care not to scare her.

“Oh, training? Soooo...if I train, will my hands get huge too?”

“If you put in effort, sure.”

Loli Loli let go of my hand and began to look down at her own hands. Her shoulders were trembling. Her voice quivered with sadness. “No... I don't want my hands to get huge...” Tears started welled in her eyes.

Argh—she was always so volatile, it was really stressing me out! “H-heh, Filia. Can I still not come in?!”

“Please wait just a little longer!”

No, Filia, save me! Were they still not done talking? Oh, no, and now there was this little girl who looked like she was about to burst into tears right in front of me. What was I even supposed to do?

Okay. It was time for my last chance attempt!

“Hey, Loli Loli, check this out—hooah!”

I flexed my pectoral muscles and exploded my clothes off, leaving me exquisitely half-naked! The remnants of my outfit fluttered to the ground like falling cherry blossom petals. Ah, what a wondrous spectacle!

It took a few more minutes before I was allowed into the bedroom. Filia opened the door and invited us in.

“Huh? Yuri, what happened?”

There I was, just half-naked and chilling. I'd meant it as a sort of desperate gag, hoping that Loli Loli would like it. At the very least, I had hoped it'd stop her from bursting into tears or something. I'd figured that if she did like it, well, then maybe there was some hope for her. If she didn't, I knew I was probably in trouble. Such was my muscley gamble. I couldn't remember the last time I'd broken out in a cold sweat outside of battle.

"His clothes, they just exploded like bang!" said Loli Loli. "It was just too much! Like, it was revolutionary!"

"It's been...a lot," I said dejectedly.

After hearing Loli Loli's explanation, Filia looked over at me with a baffled expression, but I didn't have the energy to explain. It couldn't remember the last time I had been this mentally exhausted.

"More importantly," I said quietly, "have you finished explaining things to Ashley?"

"Yes, generally," she whispered.

After Filia and I had that brief, hushed exchange, I stood on the sidelines and watched Ashley walk out. If Ashley decided that there was no way in hell she'd allow a majin into her village or something like that, then there'd be no way to show Loli Loli the festival. It wasn't like I really felt that strongly about Loli Loli or Ashley, but we'd been traveling with Ashley, and Filia loved her like a sister. Loli Loli was practically a stranger.

I crossed my arms and watched Ashley. She approached Loli Loli with fierce intensity and...

Bowed her head. "I'm sorry! About what I did, I mean, I'm... really, really sorry!"

"It's okay!"

An immediate answer, huh? Ashley looked up in surprise.

Loli Loli just looked back at her with a bright, sunny smile, and flashed a peace sign with her fingers. "There's no point in worrying about what happened in the past! Besides, uh...Ashbee, was it? Uh, you apologized! That's good enough for me! Loli Loli's heart is all cleared up!"

What the heck? Was she a saint or something?

Ashley's eyes widened, but she responded with a relieved smile. "Thank you..."

"Loli Loli?" said Filia gently. "It's not Ashbee, okay? It's *Ashley*."

"I see, my mistake! Sorry, Ashley!"

"N-no, I'm the one who...I'm sorry..." Ashley stammered, struggling to get the words out and shrinking away. I never thought I'd see Ashley shrink away from anybody. "Ah! I started crying! I'm so sorry, I made you see something so embarrassing, Big Sis! Yuri! And Loli Loli too, I'm sorry for suddenly crying!"

Ashley put her hand to the back of her head bashfully after she finally got a hold of herself.

At that, Filia, she bent down and made eye contact with Ashley. "Well, you saw me when I was sleeping in the morning, all groggy and such. The way I see it, we're even. Got it?"

Oh, I'd forgotten about that.

Loli Loli furrowed her brow thoughtfully. Then she patted Filia on the head, messing with her silver hair. "You sleep in? You gotta wake up in the morning, sleepyhead!"

"Um, sure," said Filia. "I'll, uh, be better about that..."

"Ah ha ha! Big Sis got scolded!"

"Ugh, how many humiliations must I endure in one day?" But Filia smiled mischievously and stuck out her peach-colored tongue.

The two girls laughed at that for some reason. I didn't really get it, but at least things had worked out peacefully.

It seemed like Loli Loli was the type of person who didn't put up any walls around herself. Maybe it was her openness, or maybe all three of them were just on similar wavelengths, because they were soon fast friends.

As for me? The three of them gave me sidelong glances as they chatted away happily, maybe because I was spinning around upside down. You gotta train your vestibular system, after all. As I was training, I listened in on their conversation. They were talking about the festival and inviting Loli Loli.

"A festival? Is that a fun thing?" asked Loli Loli.

"Yes, it is!" said Ashley. "I'm sure you'll love it, Loli Loli."

Before I knew it, Ashley was talking to Loli Loli like she was a close friend. They'd been blasting each other back and forth with magic just hours ago too. Man, did kids these days just have like super high-level communication skills or something?

"If this is your first time at a festival," said Filia, "I think you'll have tons of fun. Why, even I've only even seen my own village's festival. I suppose I'm looking forward to it too."

"This is my first festival, ever, of any kind," I chimed in, as I continued spinning.

"Oh? You're all festival newbies?" said Ashley. "Tee hee hee! Well then, I guess that means I'll just have to take the lead!"

"Thanks," I said, "we'll be countin' on ya!"

Ashley, riding high on her expertise, got fired up like she was on some kinda mission. She was such an enthusiastic kid, it was really just totally cute.

"If you're taking the lead, Ashley," I said, "then we won't have to worry about anything."

"I'm excited!" shouted Loli Loli, spreading her arms out wide. She couldn't wait, and neither could I.

Except—wait a minute, we still hadn't explained things to the villagers, had we? They were the key players in this event, after all, so we definitely needed their approval or this would all be for nothing.

I wanted to bring that up, but they all seemed so happy. Nah, we'd...we'd figure something out. Definitely.

Chapter 11: Is a Donut Hole a Donut?

THE SECOND WE LEFT Ashley's house, we were surrounded by the villagers. They all wanted to check in on their neighbor.

Moichi rushed forward from the crowd. "Hey Ashley, are you okay?!"

Ashley nodded. "I'm sorry for making you all worry. I'm all right. It's okay."

"I-I see, I'm glad, but...is that girl...is she okay to be around?" asked Moichi. "She's not gonna...you know, go crazy or nothin'?"

"Me? Loli Loli? Loli Loli would never go crazy! I am way too incredibly intelligent for that!"

"She's not a bad kid," Ashley insisted. "She's a majin, but she's a cheerful, kind girl. So, everyone, I have a request. I...I'd like you to allow Loli Loli to join the festival. Is that okay?"

The crowd shifted their gazes to Loli Loli.

"Hm?" Loli Loli cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

Since she looked and acted just like any regular child, the villagers' fears were visibly fading away. From the start, the villagers had been scared because of their assumptions about majin. Once they met Loli Loli, though, they seemed to quickly understand that she was a good person.

"Sorry for runnin' away just as soon as we saw you," said Moichi. "This might not make up for it, but please, have fun at the festival."

The rest of the villagers agreed. I think it was probably a good thing that Ashley was the one to ask. An outsider like me or Filia couldn't have argued that Loli Loli wasn't a danger to them—they wouldn't have believed us. But the villagers had absolute faith in Ashley. Still, I admit that I never imagined her request would be so easily accepted.

"Ashley, you really are quite popular, aren't you?" said Filia.

“That’s ’cause Ashley’s the first S-Rank adventurer to come from these parts,” said Moichi. “She’s the pride of the village.”

Ahh. Well, they said there were fewer than a hundred S-Rank adventurers in the entire world, so it sure was something to be proud of. That also explained why Ashley had insisted on fighting alone yesterday. If people had that much faith in you, you’d want to live up to it.

“Okay, we got permission from the villagers,” said Ashley. “So now Loli Loli can see the festival!”

“Ah! Well done, Ashley! Loli Loli praises you!” said Loli Loli, standing up on her tiptoes and stretching her back to reach higher, rubbing Ashley’s head somewhat roughly. Ashley didn’t seem to mind having her hair ruffled.

“Listen up, okay?” said Ashley. “Festivals are meant to be fun. So, everyone, enjoy the festival to the fullest!”

“Understood!”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it!”

“Yep.”

Loli Loli got permission to participate in the festival, but it wasn’t like all of our problems were solved yet.

“Hey, Moichi?”

“What’s up, Yuri?”

“Can I come by your shop? I wanted to ask you more about that threat you got,” I said with utmost seriousness. There was a possibility an attack would come in the middle of the night—tonight. If we didn’t do anything about it, we wouldn’t be able to truly enjoy the festival.

We headed over to Moichi’s shop. It was located in the exact middle of the village, immediately in front of the Fire God idol. As we entered the shop, a faintly sweet smell tickled our noses. The spacious store had a really relaxed feel; it was perfect for this tranquil village.

“This shop has such a nice atmosphere,” said Filia.

“Ya think so?” said Moichi, looking bashful at the praise. “Thanks, I really appreciate it!”

“I love Moichi’s shop too,” said Ashley. “His stuff is so yummy.”

“Ashley’s been a regular since my pop’s time. She really means a lot to me.”

“He he, true! You should be grateful,” said Ashley, puffing out her chest.

“Yes, yes, thank you for your patronage, Ashley,” Moichi teased. The sight was so heartwarming that it almost made me completely forget about the coming attack.

“What do you sell here anyway?” I asked.

“Oh, donuts. Donuts.”

“Donuts?” I asked as a certain man’s face popped up in my mind. That S-Rank adventurer...Javagiir was his name, right? He had been a pretty strange fellow. Where was he right now? I really wanted to trade blows with him sometime. And maybe give him a rousing lecture on muscle, since he had looked so unhealthy and all.

I was sure he’d get even stronger if I told him about muscle training. And when he got stronger, we’d fight again. Heh! This was the best idea ever. It’d be like, a perfect circle of fifty trainy punchy fighters!

“He just started smiling all of the sudden,” said Ashley. “Is he okay?”

“That’s just how Yuri is.”

“That’s what worries me.”

“Uh. Well, that’s a good point...”

“Hey, Yuri, Yuri!” Loli Loli piped in, tugging on my arm. “Maybe you’re not really a proper grown-up after all?” She said all that with an entirely straight face.

Jeez, while I was caught up in my fantasies, they were all just taking advantage of it to say whatever the heck they wanted!

“I *am* a proper adult. An intellectual muscle man! A *gentle muscle man*!” I argued, releasing my muscles as a sign of protest. My muscles swelled out with a forceful boom and my body was revealed in all its glory.

“Oh! That’s pretty amazing, Yuri! Respect!” Loli Loli cheered.

“Totally, right?” I responded by striking a series of poses.

In the meantime, Moichi and the others just continued their conversation. “Well, the donuts we sell here are different. They have a unique flavor.”

“Oh? What’re they like?”

“Well, they—you know what? It’d actually be easier to just make ‘em for ya. Wait a minute.”

Moichi withdrew into the kitchen. Loli Loli stretched her neck out, trying to see just where Moichi had disappeared to. The second she realized donuts were on the table, her interest swung totally away from muscles.

“Donuts! I know what those are!” said Loli Loli. “They’re really yummy, aren’t they?! Loli Loli likes them too!”

“Oh, Loli Loli, you know about donuts?” I asked her.

She puffed out her cheeks and shot me a look. “Hmph! You always underestimate me! Of course I know about them!”

Was it that obvious? In my defense, she hadn’t known a thing about festivals. I wasn’t really sure how to predict what she did and didn’t know, honestly. Loli Loli let out an indignant snort.

“Moichi’s donuts are especially yummy,” Ashley interrupted, “so I hope you’re looking forward to them.”

“Really? In that case, we’ll just have to wait and see!” said Filia.

“You’re really talkin’ them up,” I said.

“Yep! Because they really are yummy.” Ashley’s eyes glazed over like she had been enchanted, and she looked vacantly off into empty space as if she were lost in donut memories. She was clearly trying not to drool. It wasn’t at all what you’d have expected from her.

Still, unless Ashley’s sense of taste was seriously screwed up, I supposed we really could expect some dynamite donuts. But I wasn’t the one looking forward to it the most—that was definitely Filia. Her passion for food was extraordinary.

“If you say so, then I’m positively swelling with anticipation—huh?!” Filia wore a look of pure goofy glee—the kind of look that might’ve ruined somebody’s image of a beautiful woman. The moment

she noticed my gaze, she quickly reverted to her typical dignified expression. Was she embarrassed that I'd seen her looking all—

“Yuri, were you looking at my chest just now?! You perv—did the word ‘swelling’ set you off and get you ogling?! That’s so mean!”

“I wasn’t lookin’ there and wasn’t thinkin’ that!”

Filia squeezed herself, huddling her shoulders in, trembling with fear. Seriously, couldn’t she just read my mind to know there was no problem?

She sniffed. “Well then, at least say I’m cute.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?!”

“I’m talking about you repeating after me: Filia is super cute. There! Now, you try!”

Was she playing with me? *Was* she reading my mind, by chance? I shot her a narrow-eyed look.

“I-I’m not reading your mind. Okay?” said Filia.

She wasn’t, huh? But I hadn’t even said that out loud!

“Pwee-pfft-pshhh!” Filia whistled *extremely* badly in an attempt to change the subject.

“You know, you’re kind of unfortunate.”

“What are you talking about, Yuri?” asked Ashley, putting her hand on Filia’s shoulder.

I should’ve expected Ashley to back up her Big Sis. She always had been more attached to Filia than to me.

“A-Ashley!” Filia gasped, moved by the support. She was overjoyed to have Ashley standing beside her.

Eyes alight, Ashley declared, “Big Sis is the best kind of unfortunate!”

“Ashley?!” Filia reeled. She’d thought an ally had come to her aid in her darkest hour only to suffer a serious blow. Before my eyes, I saw Filia’s hit points reduced to zero.

As if to comfort her, Ashley put a hand on both of her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. “It’s all right, Big Sis. You know, I think you look better with smaller breasts!”

“Ack!” Filia crumpled to the floor from sheer mental anguish, as if

her soul had left her body. Ashley had dealt her a decisive blow.

“Wow...that was surprisingly brutal, Ashley.”

“M-me? What was brutal about that?” She looked like a puzzled child.

She'd really unleashed a mortal blow by accident, huh? Amazing. She had a promising future ahead of her.

As for Filia, she shook her head and wobbled around on the floor for a little while, but she eventually managed to struggle back to her feet. Then, in a trembling voice, she made an announcement. “O-okay, listen here, everyone: I'm going to be going through a growth spurt real soon! I'm not giving up yet, you hear me?! I'm not giving up!”

At the sound of her voice, I was filled with a strange desire to get as far away as I could, as quickly as possible. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ashley felt the same. Yet the two of us stood there, paralyzed.

At last, a girl's voice broke the silence. “Hey, do you have a minute?” said Loli Loli. “I have something I want to say.”

“Wh-what is it, Loli Loli?”

Loli Loli stood tall on her tiptoes and patted Filia lightly on the shoulder. “Love yourself as you are. You hear me?”

“That's...a lot to hear from you,” said Filia. “I-I feel tears coming on...”

Fair, yeah. It was hard to imagine those words coming from the mouth of someone who looked like such a kid.

“Sorry to keep y'all waiting, they're done,” said Moichi, coming back from the kitchen. He carefully held a tray in each arm, each with a number of circular baked goods on top of them. “They're called ‘Donuts Sans Holes’! We've been makin' them like this for generations now.” He held a tray out in front of us.

Sure enough, the pastries were all made of usual donut-type batter, but they didn't have holes in their centers. Interesting...Donuts Sans Holes seemed like a weird way to put it, though.

“Whoa! We can really eat these?” asked Filia the minute the pastries were in front of her. And just like that, she'd recovered. Well, Filia was a foodie, so that wasn't too surprising, especially with that delicious scent wafting right up to her nose.

“Yep, go ahead and eat up.”

“Well then, time to dig in...aaaaah, it’s so yummy!” Filia pressed her hands to her cheeks happily after just one bite.

Looked like it was tasty after all, huh? I decided to try it myself. I brought the donut up to my mouth, and a rich, full-bodied aroma gently tickled my nose. When I took a bite, the springy mouthfeel left me feeling utterly satisfied. Soft and springy.

“That’s good!”

“Yeah, it’s delicious like always! Moichi is really talented, after all.”

“I really am, aren’t I?” Moichi bowed happily, chef hat in hand.

“They’re wonderfully chewy. Super airy,” I said.

“They’re as soft as my marvelous elfy cheeks!” said Filia, beaming.

“Cheeks?” Ashley repeated. “I-I want to touch your cheeks, Big Sis!”

“Okay. Here.” Filia filled her cheeks with air, puffing them out. Ashley poked Filia’s cheek, her finger trembling with delight. At the touch, Ashley’s cheeks turned scarlet too, as she became even more delighted. Filia looked even happier at Ashley’s happiness, and—look, it was basically a perpetual motion machine of positivity.

“Hey, Yuri, I don’t get it,” said Loli Loli. “What’s so fun about this?”

“Beats me. Go ask the grown-ups.”

Loli Loli and I continued to munch on our Donuts Sans Holes while marveling at how easily those two entertained themselves.

“Okay!” said Ashley suddenly. “Now that we’ve finished, I think it’s about time we have a serious talk.”

Yeah, we couldn’t just hang around forever. It was about time that we started putting our information in order.

“Can I see that letter again?” asked Filia.

“Sure.”

Taking the letter from Moichi, Filia read the contents once again. Her eyes moved smoothly as she read, but they stopped suddenly as she focused on a specific part.

“This part right here, it troubles me,” Filia said. “‘This shop shouldn’t exist.’ What does that mean? Moichi, do you have any idea what you might have done to warrant such resentment?”

“No, not a clue. I mean, this village is pretty isolated from other villages, so our villagers have relatively strong bonds. Around here, everybody just works together, you know?”

He was right about that. The strength of those bonds were evident to me even as an outsider. Did that mean the culprit wasn’t a villager?

“Could it be someone from outside the village?” I asked.

Moichi shifted his gaze up as he racked his brain. Then he clapped his hands together with a slap. “Oh! Yeah, just yesterday, an unfamiliar man came to my shop!”

“Care to tell me about him?”

“Yeah, he was this unhealthy-looking fella in a black coat. He shoved the donuts he bought into his coat pocket after he bought ‘em, so he left a pretty big impression, you know?”

An unhealthy-looking man with a black coat? Was that who I thought it was? I looked over at Filia, and Filia was looking over at me.

Javagiir. The S-Ranked adventurer we’d met back in the donut shop in Jeepupp. Could he have been the guy behind it?

No, it was hard to imagine that he would do something like this. He really seemed to love donuts, after all. If anything, he would probably go out of his way to help a donut shop. I glanced at Filia, and she nodded.

“Filia and I might have an idea who that coat guy is,” I said.

“Huh? Really?!” said Ashley, surprised.

“Yeah. We’ve only met him once, but he was quite the donut fan. He probably came here because he specifically heard tell of the donut shop in this village.”

“And you’re saying that he’s *not* the culprit?” asked Ashley.

“I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think he’s our guy. Still, he’s an S-Rank adventurer. If we tell him what’s going on, he might be able to help us guard the town.”

“Fortunately, we have money to cover that if we must,” said Filia, lifting up the bag of holding at her hip.

If Javagiir wasn't willing to help us purely out of goodwill, he might sign on as part of a request. Getting an S-Rank adventurer to fulfill a request was pretty pricey, but the amount of cash we had saved meant it wouldn't be a problem.

"No, I couldn't ask you to do so much..." said Moichi.

Filia shook her head. "Don't worry about it, all right? Ashley has always been good to us. This is our way of saying thank you."

"Big Sis..."

I shook my head too. "If that's not enough to convince you, then build a small household shrine and dangle from it to train your muscles while you worship muscle itself. If you do that, Moichi, you will be granted the divine protection of muscle."

"Moichi, please just ignore whatever Yuri says," said Filia.

Why?! I was just trying to be friendly and give him some advice. Jeez, young people these days.

"Wait, wouldn't something like doing muscle training on a household altar normally be considered taboo?" asked Filia.

"Don't be ridiculous! Muscle training is the purest act in the world. The altar would be pleased."

"Are you serious?" asked Filia.

"Abso-positively."

"I am completely unable to hide my bewilderment. You just responded in the affirmative with absolutely no hesitation ..."

"A-anyway," said Moichi with a slight grimace, "I'm really glad that you all are going to such lengths to protect my shop."

Suddenly, Loli Loli shouted, a huffy expression on her face. "What about me? I don't want to be left out!"

Oh, right—we'd put off explaining the situation to Loli Loli. We needed to give her a rundown of what was going on too.

"Moichi's shop might get attacked," said Ashley. "And we're going to stop that from happening. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand! That means that you're all great, right?" Loli Loli looked at us with sparkling eyes after hearing our story. She looked at us like we were heroes or something... "It's not good to do bad

things!” she added. “If you do bad things, then you need to be punished! I’ll help you! You should be honored!”

And, just like that, Loli Loli decided to throw in with us.

Chapter 12: Why Are You Crying?

“**F**IRST, LET’S FIGURE OUT what we need to do before midnight.”

We needed to take stock of our situation. The festival started tomorrow at sundown. Before that happened, though, there was a possibility that Moichi’s donut shop would be attacked in the middle of the night. On top of that, Javagiir had come here the day before. So, the plan was to...look for Javagiir and get his help with protecting the village, I supposed?

“I think that would be a good idea,” said Filia, having read my thoughts.

Man, it was kind of difficult to keep track of everything when the story was so all over the place. “Oof, this is all gettin’ a little complicated. Filia, can you outline the situation in terms of muscles?”

“That isn’t one of my many talents,” she replied.

“Seriously? Come on, Filia, it’s an essential skill for any adult!”

“In what society would you need *that* kind of skill?” she countered.

In *human* society, right? Well, whatever. The sun was gonna set soon, and we didn’t have time to waste sitting around gabbing. The villagers were alerted to be on the lookout for Javagiir, and we had to start searching too, and as soon as possible.

“We’ll split into two groups,” I said. “Me and Loli Loli will be the eyes in the sky, and Filia, you and Ashley will cover the ground. Sound good?”

There were no objections, so we split up and started sniffing out Javagiir. I released my muscles and grabbed at the air with the soles of my feet. As I kicked, I soared up into the sky. Loli Loli, flapping her icy wings, followed right after me.

“Hey, Loli Loli? If you see a man with white hair who’s wearing a black coat, tell me.”

“Okay! I’ll do my best to find him!”

The villagers had the town covered, so we opted to search the surrounding area, where fewer things obstructed our view. With my eyes, I could clearly see a pebble three hundred feet away. I'd trained, after all. Now all that was left was to figure out which direction we should focus our search on, since the land stretched out in all directions.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me. Loli Loli, you flew in from over that way. Did you see anyone?"

"Hm? Hmm..." Loli Loli put her hand to her chin, thinking it over. Then she put her thumb and forefinger together, making a zero. "Sorry, Yuri. I can't remember anything. I was too busy taking in the scenery!"

"I see. Well, it's all right." Yeah—when you're flying, you don't really pay much attention to people walking down on the ground or anything. On top of that, a kid like Loli Loli would get especially distracted. "Okay, in that case, let's just cross out the direction I came from on that Earth Dragon Bus. We'll focus our search on the other three directions, in order."

"Okey dokey!" shouted Loli Loli.

We didn't have enough time to look *everywhere*. But we hadn't passed Javagiir on the way here, so we'd avoid scouting the road from here to Jeepupp and would instead prioritize searching in the other three cardinal directions. With that in mind, we took off. We flew over the plains and scattered trees, but we saw no signs of anyone who looked like Javagiir.

Hmm. But wouldn't it be more efficient to let him know we were looking for him? How could we do that?

"Javagiir! Come on ouuuut! Loli Loli wants to meet yooooou!" shouted Loli Loli as loud as she could with her tiny lungs, flapping her icy wings.

"Oh, calling out to him? You're so smart, Loli Loli!"

That would make it easier for him to notice us. It was so efficient that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it!

"Loli Loli is smart?! Am I a genius?!"

"Yep. I'm gonna start copying you right now! But, uh, before I do that, there's something I gotta tell you. This is going to get *really* loud, so cover your ears."

"Huh? Okay." Loli Loli looked puzzled, but she put her hands up

and covered her ears tight, blinking at me innocently.

I sucked in as much air as I possibly could...and converted it all to pure dynamic sound. "JAVAGIIIR! IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, SHOOT SOME MAGIC INTO THE SKYYYYYYYY!"

My voice boomed in all directions, the shout reaching everywhere equally. It vibrated the very air. Trees lost their leaves. Birds passed out mid-flight.

Phew! I let out a sigh of satisfaction.

Now if magic got blasted up into the sky from somewhere, we'd know there was an extremely high chance that Javagiir would be waiting for us at the source. That way, he could lead us to where he was, thereby dramatically increasing our chances of finding him.

I tapped Loli Loli on the shoulder, gesturing to her that she could uncover her ears now. When Loli Loli moved her hands away from her head, she shook them excitedly in front of her chest. "That was such a loud voice! If I hadn't put my hands to my ears, it would've shattered my eardrums!"

"That's 'cause I've trained my lungs and throat."

"Ohhh? You say some really interesting things! How did you train those?"

"For my lungs, I held my breath for twenty-four hours straight. For my throat, I held a shout for twenty-four hours straight."

"Ah ha ha! You're an idiot. I like you!"

"I'm not an idiot, but thanks," I replied gratefully. It was nice to have somebody who really understood me for a change, you know?

Anyway, for the time being, we decided to stick around to see if any magic signal was cast. While we waited, we made small talk.

"So how did you end up here anyway, Loli Loli?" I asked.

"I live in a place called the Demon Kingdom, actually. My father dotes on me so much!"

The Demon Kingdom...that was the country the majin were from, right? I guessed that made sense. There were probably some pretty strong people over there. Man, I just had to go there someday.

Loli Loli smiled even more than usual as she talked. She seemed really proud of her family. "All the doting makes me so happy! But...if I

stay with Father forever, Loli Loli will never grow as a majin! So I have to leave home periodically!”

“You’re kind of a troublemaker, huh? I can empathize with what you’re sayin’, though.”

I, on the other hand, had always lived alone. I understood the importance of protection, though. I’d heard it said that children are the apple of your eye, so of course parents wanna keep them safe. Still, children always grew up when their parents weren’t looking. That’s what I’d come to believe, anyway.

Hey, wait a second...if children are the apple of your eye, did that mean that people really used to put apples in their eyes—or kids?! Was that where the expression came from? Wouldn’t that hurt? Could people do that? If so, that meant I was losing to Loli Loli’s dad. No matter how much I trained my eyeballs, it’d still hurt if I put a child in my eye. Damn it, was I really okay with just losing? No, no way!

“Loli Loli! Fly right at my eyeball!”

“What are you saying, Yuri?!”

“I’m just tryin’ to be my best self! You get me?!”

“No! Loli Loli doesn’t want to kill people!”

Unfortunately, Loli Loli didn’t have the slightest intention of shoving herself into my eyeballs. I endured my overflowing feelings of regret by biting my lower lip. I’d finally gotten a chance to train my eyeballs, but I couldn’t just force a child to help me.

“Hmph! You ruined my backstory, Yuri!” Loli Loli furrowed her well-maintained eyebrows and her smile turned into a frown. I’d put her in a bad mood by interrupting her.

“Sorry, it was an accident.” I just couldn’t stop thinking about training, no matter what. I knew it was a bad habit, but it wasn’t something I could just up and quit.

“If you think this is a problem that can be solved by saying it was an ‘accident,’ then you’re soft in the head!”

Ow! She was so sweet and innocent on the outside, but her tongue was so wicked! She really knew how to get you.

“Anyway!” shouted Loli Loli, getting us back on track. “I’d left home again, just like I’d done a bunch of times before! Then when I did,

I saw that huge fire guy! Then I met everyone!” She had an especially big smile on her face now. “I’m happy that Yuri and Filia and Ashley accepted me! Loli Loli’s heart was saved because of that! Or, um... saveded? Saveded? Saveded? I dunno?”

“You keep adding ‘-eds,’” I told her flatly.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! I don’t get it!”

“You think you can gloss over it by laughing?!”

Not that I picked up the faintest hint of manipulation behind her carefree smile. No, it seemed to me that she really was the kind of person who didn’t stress out over the little things. Her innocence was so incredible that it was kind of staggering. I got the sense that she was gonna be an amazing person in the future. As I was thinking that, I continued to watch the skies to see if any magic was being cast upward into the air.

A few hours later, Loli Loli and I descended back down onto the ground. We hadn’t found a thing. No matter how long we waited, we didn’t see any magic cast into the air at all. Even after searching the area with a fine-toothed comb, there was no sign of Javagiir.

As we landed in the center of the village, Filia and Ashley came running up to us. Several people from the village were with them. They had probably been sharing their reports with each other.

“How’d things go for you guys?” I asked.

Filia shook her head, her silver hair bouncing. “We didn’t find him. What about you, Yuri?”

“Same.”

The villagers’ faces fell at this, which made sense. If Moichi’s shop was to be attacked, then there was a possibility that the village would be attacked as well. Naturally, they wanted as many adventurers as possible to help them out.

“Everyone, listen!” Ashley’s voice rang out over the crowd. “We couldn’t find the adventurer Javagiir, but please don’t worry. Because I—no, my *friends* and I—we’ll definitely protect this village.”

As she spoke, she radiated dignity and inspired her neighbors. Her declaration made everyone stand up just a bit straighter. The anxiety plaguing the villagers’ faces faded away at Ashley’s words. It really did seem like she was the emotional pillar of the community.

“If you make that kind of grand pronouncement, you’ll be in a heap of trouble if you don’t deliver,” I teased.

“Aww.” Ashley smirked, jabbing me with her elbow. “If you’re scared, you can take the day off, you know?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that! “Ha, don’t be ridiculous. If anythin’, it’s the opposite. I’m excited!” I flashed a toothy smile.

What could I say? I really got fired up in these kinds of situations! I didn’t know what kind of enemy we were gonna face, but it’d be a bummer if they were weak. Hopefully they’d at least be good enough to get me revved up, right? Whew, hot damn—I couldn’t wait!

“Is it almost time? Is it almost midnight?” I asked.

“Not yet, Yuri. We still have several hours until midnight,” replied Filia. Where I was fidgety, she seemed calm and composed.

“Hey, Filia, can ya use any magic that can move time forward or anythin’?” I asked.

“Believe it or not, even I—the transcendently beautiful elf Filia—cannot do such a thing.”

Even Filia couldn’t? Well, I guessed it made sense. Even muscle magic couldn’t do that, so I’d figured as much.

“Besides,” Filia added, “if I could manipulate time, I’d just repeat holidays endlessly, so time wouldn’t even advance. He he!”

“Uh, that’s not...that’s not a good thing. You know that, right?”

I mean, this was the first time I’d ever heard anyone actually say “he he” out loud in that kinda voice.

Filia stuck her chest out proudly, wearing an oddly smug look on her face. I didn’t know if she was maintaining her composure or if she really just didn’t feel nervous in the first place.

The way she glanced at me said clearly that she’d read my mind, and she gently patted her slender abdomen. “When I feel really awkward, I get a stomachache. That’s why I try not to let myself get too worked up. We’re here to protect the villagers. How would it make them feel if I looked out of it?”

Huh, she really did have a lot on her mind, eh? Filia was always so considerate, and I really...wasn’t. She was pretty amazing! Though her mental state was a little fragile. If she could fix that, she’d become

even stronger.

“Hey Filia, let me teach ya about a kind of muscle training to strengthen your mental fortitude.”

“No, thank you. Wait a minute...muscle training can't do that, can it?”

“Oho, you interested? Are ya? Are ya?” I pressed Filia over and over, staring at her intensely from a close distance, my pupils dilated.

Filia hid her face from me. “Eek! Scary! Yuri, your eyes are scary!”

Aw, jeez, I'd really freaked her out. I backed off. “When we go back to Jeepupp, I'll spend a whole day teachin' ya about it, so I hope you're lookin' forward to it.”

“Ugh, I should've known better than to look remotely interested... I want to rewind time...” Filia groaned.

For some reason, Filia was drooping over in disappointment. Still, I smiled; at least she was interested!

More time passed, and night fell.

“Oh, hey, that reminds me. Loli Loli, I wanted to talk with you,” said Moichi. We'd shared what info we had, and we were about to split up for the night.

“With me? What about?” Loli Loli cocked her head to the side, looking totally baffled.

Then Moichi presented something to her. “You worked really hard for the village to help find this person, Loli Loli. We all felt so pathetic for being scared of such a sweet girl. I don't know if this is enough to be a good apology or anythin', but we wanted you to have this. It's a gift from everyone in the village.”

“Is this...a flower crown?”

It was some kind of circular ornament. The ring was made up of colorful, light flowers, and it could be placed upon her head.

“Yep. There were some old folks who were too frail to go out and join the search, so instead they made this with flowers they'd picked for the festival.”

As Moichi presented the flower crown to Loli Loli, the elderly

people of the village approached as well.

“We’re sorry, Loli Loli, for being afraid of you. Please forgive us.”

“Indeed. We didn’t know much about your taste, so this might not be the best gift. But it contains our apologies and our gratitude. Please accept it.”

“Are you sure I can have something this wonderful? Even though I’m a majin?” asked Loli Loli, bewildered. Her brown arms trembled slightly.

“Think of it this way,” Filia said gently. “I’m an elf, and Yuri is a muscle. But we get along well with everyone here. Race has nothing to do with making a connection to others. You can accept it, Loli Loli.”

I coughed. “Hey, uh, Filia? Nice speech and all, but you, uh, you know I’m human, right?” Sure, I absolutely loved my muscles, but I still ought to be categorized as a human being.

“We were all deeply moved by how hard you worked for the sake of my shop and the village,” said Moichi to Loli Loli. “Please, take it.”

“Um. Yeah...okay.”

Moichi placed the flower crown on Loli Loli’s head, laying the ring of flowers gently atop her smooth blonde hair. “Looks good on you!”

“R-really?”

“Yeah.”

Loli Loli stood there, seemingly unsure of what to do. She looked like an angel that had just touched down to earth. The flower crown was her halo.

“Thank you for coming to our village, Loli Loli,” said Moichi, and the rest of the villagers followed suit with words of thanks.

Soon enough, Loli Loli was sniffing. “I feel like I’ve lost my mind...” Her blue eyes filled with tears. “It’s weird. I’m happy, but I’m crying...”

Filia bent down and wiped away the tears streaming down Loli Loli’s face. She smiled lovingly at the girl. “Don’t worry, Loli Loli. You haven’t lost your mind. Those are called tears of joy.”

“Tears of joy...? Tears of joy are so salty!”

“Are you lickin’ ’em?” I asked with a wry chuckle.

“Wahh! I never thought something would make me cry like this!”

“Oh, dear, you’re all snotty now,” Ashley chuckled, a little astonished. “All right, all right, here you go.” She took out a piece of tissue paper and held it up to Loli Loli’s nose. “Okay, blow.”

Loli Loli blew her nose with a loud honk, and then smiled at everyone with moist eyes. “I owe you all a great deal of thanks! I, Loli Loli, have grown to love this village, so I want it to be well taken care of! He he he!”

Loli Loli then lovingly touched the flower tiara on her head. Her innocent grin brought a smile to everyone’s faces.



Chapter 13: On the Night of the Full Moon

THAT NIGHT, as midnight approached and the insects quietly slept, Filia, Ashley, and I gathered in Ashley's living room, ready to depart. We still had about an hour to go before midnight, but we figured it would be best to get to Moichi's shop as soon as possible.

"Okay, Yuri, listen up," said Filia in a hushed tone. "Please make sure you move quietly, so you don't wake her, all right?"

"Yeah, I got it," I replied, nodding.

We'd decided that it wasn't the greatest idea to endanger a kid as young as Loli Loli, so we'd put her to bed. Loli Loli was sleeping comfortably right in front of us, and we didn't want to make too much noise and wake her up. As such, we had to leave the living room very, very slowly.

Carefully, slowly, we made our way through the room one step at a time. Ashley's house was made of good, sturdy material, so even if a person of my weight moved around in it, the floor didn't make a single creak.

Briiiiiiiiiinnng!

Suddenly, a piercing noise echoed throughout the room.

"Hywahh?! A-Ashley, what was that sound?!"

"I-I don't know! I didn't do anything!"

"It's going to wake up Loli Loli!"

"She's already awake!"

Before we had time to figure out the source of the sound, Loli Loli's eyelids, which had been firmly shut in her deep sleep, snapped open. We stared at her blankly. Loli Loli pulled an alarm clock out from the couch cushions behind her and pressed a button. The ringing stopped.

"I knew you were going to leave me here!" said Loli Loli. "Thank goodness I set the alarm clock!"

I hadn't realized she'd prepared so carefully. She really did have a way of exceeding our expectations.

"I'm going too!" she declared. "Don't leave me here!"

Ashley shook her head. "It'll be dangerous. I think it'd be best if you didn't come."

"No! The villagers accepted me! I want to repay that debt of gratitude!" Loli Loli touched the flower crown on her head as she spoke.

Ashley, Filia, and I exchanged looks, then nodded.

"Okay," said Filia. "But it *will* be dangerous, so be careful."

"Okay! Let me handle some of it! I'll beat those bad guys to a pulp!"

Overwhelmed by Loli Loli's enthusiasm, we decided that it would be the four of us guarding Moichi's shop.

Once we arrived at the shop, we hid ourselves inside, concealing even our breathing. Our hiding place was in the kitchen, which was lined with leftover Donuts Sans Holes. It wasn't really in my nature to hide, but if I didn't hide now, the enemy would get too wary. If they were wary, they might not even show up. From the window of the shop, we could see the Fire God idol burning even late into the night.

Hmm. It occurred to me that the idol, which was right in front of the shop, might end up being useful cover if a battle broke out. I'd have to take our surroundings into consideration ahead of time. Just as I thought that, I sensed the presence of someone nearing the entrance.

"They're here."

The presence drew closer, coming in through the entrance toward the kitchen without making a sound. Tension and excitement shot through my body. I tingled and twitched, trying to hold myself back from making any rash moves. Not yet, not yet, not yet...

Now!

The instant we felt the presence move into the kitchen, we made our move. We'd already decided on our roles in advance; our battle

plans hadn't overlooked a thing. First, Loli Loli would turn on the lights by the entrance. Then Ashley would block the exit. In the event that the light Loli Loli turned on was targeted, Filia had her lightning magic prepared. Then I'd take on the culprit.

"Hey! Hope you're ready for this!" I shouted, even though we were still under cover of darkness.

Then, with the agility borne of my daily training regimen, I darted toward my opponent and instantly threw a punch. The moment my fist collided with the presence, the lights in the store flared on.

"Wha—?!" I lost my balance because of my excess momentum. I was sure I should have landed a hit, but it was like my fist met nothing at all—and I mean *nothing*. I don't mean that I didn't hit, or that the surface was weirdly soft. I mean *nothing-nothing*. For a moment, I almost left myself open, but I quickly regained my balance by working my muscles.

I turned toward the presence I felt, wondering just what the hell I'd punched, and saw a semi-transparent black haze floating in the air.

"Huh? What is that?" I blurted, my confusion apparent.

It was a human-shaped, faceless black haze. What in the hell was it? It didn't seem to be particularly strong from what I could sense, but...my fist had just passed right through it?

"Yuri, get away!" Filia cried, and moments later, she unleashed her lightning magic, blasting the haze. That seemed to do the trick, unlike my fists. Its humanoid form broke apart in the blink of an eye before dissipating completely.

A shocked silence hung in the air around us.

After an eternity, I spoke up. "What was that? My fist went right through it."

All we could do was share intel we'd gained from that confrontation. That was our first priority right now.

"That magic was probably necromancy," Filia said.

"Necromancy..." Ashley echoed. "I've heard of that before. It's a type of magic that allows the caster to use spirits to do their bidding, because the spirits no longer have thoughts of their own."

"Yes. What we saw just now was probably one such spirit. It's no

wonder physical attacks weren't effective against it. Spirits have ethereal forms."

"So, that means there's somebody else controllin' the spirit, right? Like a ringleader?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm almost completely certain."

"Necromancy...I've never fought a spirit before. It sounds like a pretty unique opponent. Seems like it'll be fun to fight!"

How do spirits attack in the first place, anyway? I wondered. *Possession or somethin'?* Just the thought of it was psyching me up.

Ashley looked like she was lost in thought too. "Yuri. You don't have any magical energy, right?"

"Yeah, seems that way."

"In that case, wouldn't it be better if you took the rear guard and backed us up?" she asked.

According to Ashley, by covering your body with magical energy, you could prevent a spirit from possessing it. But I didn't have magical energy, so I couldn't use that method. I would be in danger—and might endanger others—if I went into this battle without any kind of countermeasures against ethereal enemies.

I was really grateful for her concern, but I had no intention of dragging the group down. "Don't worry. Check out my muscles."

I released my muscles. The trapezius, the latissimus dorsi, rectus abdominis, triceps brachii, and quadriceps femoris...every muscle in my body boldly asserted its presence, swelling to the point that they looked about to burst. Clad in my naturally hard muscle armor, I brought both of my hands up to my head. Then I showed off my exposed abdominals to my three companions.

"So...any questions?" I asked.

"Yes! Many!" shouted Ashley. "All of the questions, Yuri! That doesn't convince me of anything at all!"

Jeez, way to freak out, Ashley!

"Well, I think Yuri might be okay," said Filia. "I can't imagine he would give the enemy any openings to allow himself to be possessed, and anyway, any spirit that tried to crawl into a body like his would just get confused."

“You have a point,” I said. “Muscles are something you develop yourself. If you just snatch away someone else’s muscles, you’ll just feel empty.”

Yeah, that Filia understood muscles quite well! Someday Filia too would get totally shredded. I just knew it!

“Big Sis, what in the world is Yuri saying?”

“Don’t worry about it. Yuri is an unidentified life form; we still haven’t made enough progress in investigating the ecological ramifications of his existence.”

“I’m a human being.”

“Then could you do us all a favor and please *try* to act like it?”

Act like a human? Was she telling me to act more on instinct, then? So—she was saying that I should be happy about being able to fight!

“Oh, no. You’ve got that look on your face. That one where you just completely misunderstood everything I just said.”

Wait, was I mistaken? Uh. Anyway, our first priority right now was to figure out how to defend the donut shop.

“Don’t worry,” I said reassuringly. “I am an intellectual muscle man, after all. I’ve already prepared countermeasures for spirits.”

“Oh, that’s amazing, Yuri!” said Ashley.

“Right?” I replied.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “But...just for the sake of reference, I want to ask: What is your plan?”

“Get them before they get me. I’ll swat ’em right outta the air before they possess me.”

Ashley blinked. “Um. You did get the part about how non-magical attacks are useless against ethereal forms, right...?”

“My last attack just didn’t have enough force behind it. I’ll try punching it harder next time. If it’s not effective, I’ll just keep punching until it is!” I replied, punching the open air. I didn’t know what “ethereal forms” and all that was about, but if I could punch it, then I could handle it.

“But we’re telling you, you *can’t* hit them...” muttered Filia,

exasperated.

Admittedly, if I couldn't hit them even if I was serious about it, this might be an opponent I was poorly suited to handle. If physical attacks were nullified, then my chances of success were—wait! At that moment, I had a revelation.

“I get it! Even if I don't have magical energy, I can make up for that by using magic, right? So I'll just use my muscle magic!”

Loli Loli gave me a worried look. “Filia, is Yuri broken?!”

“If he is, he has been since the day we met,” said Filia. She looked like she had at least one heavy sigh queued up.

Well, well. So in other words, I wasn't broken at all.

“Well, once Yuri says something, he won't listen to anyone. It's pointless trying to persuade him. But Yuri, are you really sure you're okay? This will be like going into battle unarmed,” said Filia.

“Not a problem. I'm almost always unarmed,” I declared with utmost confidence. I didn't need weapons. After all, my body was the best weapon around. The thing you should believe in the most is yourself.

“Yeah, I guess?” said Ashley. “I mean, you *have* done some pretty absurd things.”

“This is impossible for normal people! Yuri has completely lost all self-control!” said Loli Loli.

“Aw, shucks, it's no big deal.”

“Uh, you know we weren't complimenting you, right?” said Ashley.

Wait, they weren't?

We walked out of the shop. The full moon was even bigger and brighter than usual, illuminating the outdoors as if it were midday. The midnight chill made goosebumps rise on my skin. It wasn't really clear how much information the necromancer had gotten from their spirit in the kitchen, but we had to assume the enemy knew we were waiting for them.

In that case, there was no guarantee that the culprit wouldn't attack another location to create a diversion. We decided to wait for the

enemy next to the burning Fire God idol so that we could act quickly if such a situation arose.

“Well, the festival is right around the corner,” said Filia, “so I’d really would prefer to wrap this up lickety-split. Let’s do our best.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna punch the ringleader’s lights out in seconds flat!” I smacked my fists together. I really hoped this was an enemy I *could* hit, though.

It was 11:55 p.m. If the attacker still wanted to fight, they’d show up any second now. Given the contents of that letter, I couldn’t imagine that they’d just give up. They were definitely going to show.

The full moon hid behind the clouds, cloaking the village square in nighttime darkness. As it did, there was a change in the air. We all simultaneously had a premonition, a certainty that something was coming. That swiftly became a reality.

“Ah! Is the enemy there?!” shouted Loli Loli, pointing.

“Yeah. Seems like they came.”

A man approached us from the darkness, his hands in his pockets. A semi-transparent black shadow was with him. He slowly neared, a ruthless, cold-blooded aura emanating from him. It would have broken the spirit of an ordinary person in an instant. With a cruel air like that, I knew that he was, without a doubt, the spirits’ ringleader. And I had an idea that I knew him already.

“Man, I really never thought that it’d be you, Javagiir.”

“We meet again. Been a few days since we last saw each other, greenhorns.”

The S-Rank adventurer, Javagiir Garyundur, walked toward us slowly, hands still in his pockets. His legs were thin, like branches. Behind Javagiir’s hunched form, a host of semi-transparent black shades followed. They clung to him as if they truly were his shadows.

Perhaps it was the darkness of night, but Javagiir looked even more skeletal than before. But the way he walked, with countless spirits in tow, made it clear that he was a force to be reckoned with. As soon as he had arrived in front of the shop, we faced one another.

Javagiir scanned the area. But there was nothing to see except the Fire God idol. We’d told the villagers to evacuate and find a safe place far away from Moichi’s shop. It was deathly quiet. Not even the sound

of insects could be heard. There was no breathing thing anywhere near, except for us and him.

Javagiir took another look at his surroundings and muttered to himself, sounding disappointed. “Is this it? You guys didn’t call for any reinforcements or nothing?”

“Don’t need ’em. The only folks we called were the Knight Order to come and arrest you, then take you to your cell.”

The knights hadn’t yet arrived at the village, but they’d get here eventually. In the meantime, I figured it’d be a good idea to beat the crap out of this guy. Good way to pass the time.

“I see,” said Javagiir with a sigh. “Then I guess this was all a waste, huh? It’s been a long time since I’ve brought my full force.”

He didn’t look worked up at all, even though he was facing all four of us—and we weren’t people to mess with. In fact, he looked just as casual as always.

“You’re Javagiir...” said Ashley.

“Oh, you know about me? That makes me happy. Guess I’ve gotten pretty famous, then”

“You’re the one, aren’t you?”

“If you’re asking if I wrote that letter, that’s gonna be a yes. I did.”

That settled it. Javagiir was the one behind this. I had no idea where he’d been hiding, but his S-Rank abilities probably made it easy to avoid search parties.

“Even though you’re an S-Rank, didn’t you call yourself a moderate?” asked Filia. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why? Plain and simple—this shop shouldn’t exist, that’s why. No other reason. They call me a moderate, but there are some things I can’t compromise on. Sorry to say, greenhorns, but if you’re planning on getting in my way, know that I’m not gonna take it easy on you. You’re not amateurs or anything, so I’m guessing you’re prepared, right?”

This feeling of pure rage was pouring out of Javagiir, an unbridled, passionate fury. It was like standing next to a blazing bonfire. His malice was as pure as it was intense. Suddenly he drew back, as if realizing he’d let his mask slip, and his expression returned to normal.

“Do you understand the situation?” asked Filia. “It’s four against one. I think it would be best if you just surrendered quietly.”

“Hee hee hee...you four, you don’t get it. Numbers are meaningless to a necromancer. Fighting multiple foes is my specialty. I am Javagiir Garyundur, the Hollow Soldier, and I’ll show you my power!”

In a casual, well-practiced fashion, Javagiir took his hand out of his coat pocket and snapped his fingers. From the pitch darkness behind him, countless black shadows emerged, wriggling and squirming. Not just ten or twenty either. In no time at all, we were almost completely surrounded on all sides, save for the donut shop behind us.

“Get it now? *I outnumber you.* This isn’t one on four. It’s a *hundred* against four...greenhorns.” Javagiir leaned forward, hands thrust back into his pockets, a self-satisfied look on his face.



I clenched my fists tightly, not saying a word...and fired off my Pistol Punch at the black shadows surrounding us. In the next second, Loli Loli attacked more black shadows with her ice magic. Ashley roasted half the square with a fireball. Filia activated her Wind God and mowed down every shadow that got in her way. Between the magic those three used, ten of the shadowy spirits dissipated in an instant.

But the spirit I'd pierced with my Pistol Punch remained, as though nothing had happened to it at all.

Aww. Guess punching wasn't gonna do it after all. Attacks without any magical energy really wouldn't work. To think that even muscle magic was useless here...I'd never imagined such a thing could be possible.

Well, putting that aside...

"Guess that makes it ninety to four, now," I replied with an audacious grin.

"Why do you look so self-satisfied, Yuri?" asked Filia.

"Aw, don't say that, Yuri did his best! Right, Yuri?" said Loli Loli.

Come on, I really didn't need encouragement from Loli Loli! I didn't think my heart could take it.

Javagiir, on the other hand, whistled. "Hey, not bad. Yuri and Filia, was it? And those other greenhorns there too; I don't know their names. You're probably some five or ten years younger than me, but you've got some skills. I gotta say I'm impressed."

Javagiir's eyes crinkled, a joyful look on his face. He hadn't lost his senses to his rage—he still had enough presence of mind to guess what we were capable of. "But ya see, it's *actually* ninety-one against three."

The figure behind Javagiir vanished into smoke, and all at once, we felt a strong presence behind us.

"Look out!" Filia, Ashley, and I leaped forward, and as we did, we saw Javagiir dart in and put his hand on top of Loli Loli's head.

"Huh?!" She let out a hysterical, confused wail that didn't sound like it belonged anywhere near a battlefield.

Javagiir's sickly pale hand rested atop Loli Loli's head, and it began to glow with an ominous black light. Waves of nauseating,

sinister energy emanated from it.

Loli Loli's eyes turned dark and dull.

"Don't you dare touch her!" Ashley roared, charging. She ignited her fists with fire and closed in to punch Javagiir.

Javagiir summoned a spirit in front of him, using it as a shield as he fell back.

Loli Loli began to topple to the ground, and Ashley caught her in her arms. "Are you okay, Loli Loli? Hey, Loli Loli?!"

"Ashley, get away!"

"Aaah!" Loli Loli's ice magic shot through the spot where Ashley had been standing just a moment ago.

"Hm." Javagiir thrust his hands into his pockets, seeming quite interested.

"Ah..."

"I didn't notice the horns," he mused, "but...she's a majin, huh? How convenient. Majin are generally quite competent fighters." Javagiir beckoned to her, and Loli Loli walked over to him with a vacant look in her eyes.

"This is impossible..." Filia whispered. "She's been possessed?! But Loli Loli was covered in magical energy! How did—"

He sighed. "All right. Guess there's no getting around it. Listen up, because I'm giving you a lesson. I touched her directly. Get it? I can possess anyone, no matter who they are. Are you really underestimating an S-Rank?"

Javagiir glared as he spoke, and the air shuddered as if it crackled with electricity. This guy was *strong*. His incredible aura was definitely what you'd expected from an S-Rank. Deep in the back of my mind, I was sure that if I let my guard down for even an instant, he'd take total control of me right away.

He wasn't just one person, after all. All the spirits here were part of him too. He was so skilled at commanding them that he'd practically assimilated their presence into his own... Yeah, there was no way we'd beat this guy easily.

Then a voice rang out, cutting through the swirling, vicious pressure rolling off of Javagiir. It was clear as a bell, and just as out of

place.

“I see, the core of magical energy is the back of the neck. So, if we strike there, we can release someone from possession... Am I reading you right?” asked Filia.

Filia had figured out the counter to Javagiir’s possession by using her Clairvoyance to read his mind.

One of Javagiir’s eyebrows twitched. He looked Filia over from top to bottom. “How did you know that, hmm?”

“You really shouldn’t underestimate an A-Rank,” Filia taunted.

“Oh? Hee hee hee! Sorry about that, I was being rude. Look at you, greenhorns. Exceeding my expectations!” A gleeful smile crossed Javagiir’s bloodless, sickly pale face.

As we faced off with him, Ashley spoke up. “Big Sis, Yuri...I’ll handle Loli Loli.”

“You sure you got her?” I asked.

“I know I lost to her the first time, but this time’s going to be different. Loli Loli isn’t herself right now—and I am *not* going to lose to someone that isn’t her,” Ashley said firmly.

Yeah, she’d made up her mind. No way we could talk her out of it now. “Okay. Save Loli Loli.” I patted Ashley’s shoulder.

“Of course. What kind of adventurer would I be if I couldn’t save my friends? And don’t you forget that I’m an S-Rank. Leave Loli Loli to me. You two handle Javagiir,” said Ashley. “Sorry for leaving you with the biggest burden.”

She wasn’t looking at me when she spoke. Her eyes were only focused on Loli Loli. That was good. As long as we did what we could, we’d get results.

“Loli Loli, wait for me! I’ll wake you up in no time!” shouted Ashley, leaping into action, defeating black shadows one by one as she made her way toward Loli Loli. Wow, she really was a reliable pal.

“Leaving me with a burden? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m just grateful you’re lettin’ me fight the strongest enemy,” I called after Ashley as she disappeared between the shadows.

“All right, greenhorns...you ready?” asked Javagiir, slouching.

“How polite of you,” I said, “waiting for us all this time.”

“Despite my appearances, I’ve always had a reputation for taking good care of the greenhorns, y’know? Though I suppose I’ll be stripped of my adventurer license for this little incident,” he said.

Javagiir’s eyes moved, his line of sight aimed at something behind me. The black shadows rushed toward me. I couldn’t just ignore them. I didn’t have any way to deal with them directly, so I knew this was gonna be a rough fight—but then a violent wind roared, strong enough that it almost blew away my thoughts. The oncoming shadows had been tossed away.

Only one person could use wind magic that powerful. I looked over to Filia. Her silver hair swayed in the dying wind, and there was a noble look in her eyes. “Yuri, I’ll use my Wind God to deal with any spirits. Just focus on fighting *him*.”

She summoned a wall of raging wind that surrounded Javagiir and me. Every black shadow that tried to pass through the wall was torn to pieces, completely annihilated by the divine whirlwind.

Amazing... Those black shadows wouldn’t get in my way now, for sure.

“Thanks, Filia,” I called to her through the wind wall.

“Please, don’t let your guard down, not in the slightest. If you lose to him, Yuri, Ashley and I probably won’t be able to beat him either, no matter how hard we try.”

I could tell from the sound of her voice that she was already getting a little out of breath. Maintaining such a huge wall was probably taking quite a toll on her, even with her Wind God. No way could I even *think* of losing, let alone say it. Nah, there was only one thing to say to my friends.

“Leave it to me. All I gotta do is smack this nasty, slouching geezer and knock his gross little lights out,” I replied, glaring at Javagiir and cracking my knuckles. “You hear me, Javagiir? *Now* it’s one-on-one!”

All I needed to do was beat the crap out of this guy, and I was more than happy to do it. After all, I hadn’t done anything useful yet. Pretty irritating, if you asked me.

It was time to vent my frustrations!

Chapter 14: With the Moon Shining Down on Us

INSIDE THE WALL of raging winds, Javagiir and I faced each other alone. Javagiir casually scratched his head with a bony hand. “You split up, eh? Seems like the toughest one among you is that elf girl of yours. Filia.”

“Maybe so. She can do anything. She’s my invaluable partner. Honestly, she’s too good for me. All I can do for her is beat your sorry hide.”

“Ha, all right. If you think you can handle me, then bring it.”

Javagiir’s aura was incredibly intense; I could feel it from where I was standing. It was almost hard to breathe. My blood rushed through my body, my fighting spirit roused. Come on—if I wasn’t thrilled by this, would I even be a man?!

I put up my fists and looked straight at Javagiir. “Hey. I gotta request. Make sure this is fun for me!”

I rushed in.

Right as I did, Javagiir cast earth magic to raise a prison of earth around me. In an instant, every speck of light vanished, and my field of vision went totally dark.

“Kids these days, eh? So many of you greenhorns out there are forgetting your place. Three years ago, I single-handedly stopped a monster outbreak on the frontier. Really, saying something so foolish to Javagiir Garyundur, the Hollow Soldier? Look, I got no clue what your rank is, but I’ve been an adventurer for ten years now. Don’t you think it’s polite to show respect to your elders?”

I heard Javagiir’s voice coming from outside the earthen walls, all smug—and all wrong. C’mon, he had to be super naïve if he thought he’d trapped me in such a crappy prison.

“Hooah!”

Paying no to the walls surrounding me, I just charged straight ahead. The walls shattered against my body. Keeping my momentum

going, I got up close to Javagiir and struck—just once.

My fist slammed into his slender abdomen, knocking the wind from his lungs. He flew through the air. I tried to perform a follow-up attack, but the ground beneath my feet was too unstable—he'd been ready with more earth magic, and I couldn't get in close enough.

"Ugh, hey, come on, be considerate, will ya? I *am* your senior, right? How old are you anyway? I'm twenty-seven." Javagiir stood up, wobbling a bit, while spitting out some blood that had pooled inside his mouth.

And he *still* had his hands in his coat pockets, as usual. How in the world was he still conscious, even though he was so thin? He had to be using magic to strengthen himself.

"Don't give me that dumb age crap, 'senior'!"

"Dumb? That's upsetting. *Very* upsetting. Why, it's the most upsetting thing I've ever heard." As he spoke, Javagiir took something out of both of his pockets. Something brown and round...something...

Donut-y.

Clutched in his hands were your average donuts, both of which had holes right in their centers. I watched Javagir's movements carefully. Taking out donuts in the middle of a battle? Not a move I'd expected, not at all.

"This donut shop is too...*upsetting*. 'Donuts Sans Holes'? Are you kidding me? That's not a thing. They're not *donuts*! I'm fine with you people exposing your ignorance, but spreading it around? That is an act that *screams* for a purge. Have I said something wrong? Huh?"

He stuck his long, slender tongue in and out of the donut hole at such a speed that it would've been invisible to the normal human eye.

"Ahhh, I just can't get enough of this feeling of emptiness...the meaningless penetration of a donut! It's sublime! You think so too, don't you? An untongueable donut isn't a donut at all, right?"

"I don't understand a word you're saying." I could never in a million years have imagined doing something like this right in the middle of a life-or-death battle. This was *wild*.

"Too many people in our world search for a meaning that simply is not there. Donuts teach us that there *is* no such thing as the true meaning of life. Ah, how sacred...ugh, I can't believe I'm crying now.

You bastard.” Just as Javagiir said, tears were streaming down his sunken cheeks. He continued monologuing without even wiping them away. “And now, this shop! ‘Donuts Sans Holes’? That’s just unacceptable! Completely unacceptable! A store that sells fake donuts, completely unashamedly in broad daylight? I could never allow that! This shop should be met with scorn! It’s a betrayal of all things donut!”

A vein in Javagiir’s forehead bulged. He angrily spat his words, as if expressing total disgust and loathing with the world. The color of the tears flowing from his eyes changed from clear to red. While I couldn’t understand a word he was saying, Javagiir’s face was tinged with delight as he darted his tongue in and out of the donut hole again. “Bleehh, Bleehh! Ah, this is just toooooooooooooo much fun!”

“So, like...are you high?” I asked.

“High?! The only thing I’m high on is donuts! They’re all I need! And donuts only need me! We’re madly in love with one another! We’re comrades in arms who have committed to each other’s futures!” Javagiir brought the donut to his lips and kissed it.

Ohhh—*now* I understood. This guy was just like me: Donuts to him were like muscles are to me. That made this a battle of *pride*. A battle over the uncompromising dignity we had carved into our souls!

“All right, then. Let’s see whose bonds are stronger: The bond you have with donuts, or the bond I have with muscle. How ’bout it?”

All this was the wrong way for him to express his feelings, but those feelings were still real. Then again, my muscles... My muscles and I, we couldn’t lose. I swung my fist down. The pressure from my fist split the ground open, and the fissure continued splitting toward Javagiir.

“Hooah!”

He moved to avoid it, and that created an opening. I fired off a Pistol Punch. Javagiir didn’t protect himself, instead putting his life on the line to fire off earth magic bullets with reckless abandon. But my body was harder than iron. The bullets that struck me lost all their momentum the second they hit my skin, and they clattered to the ground.

“Your body... So, you’ve got a physical enhancement ability after all, huh?” he spat. “Ugh. This is why I hate muscle-brained meatheads. Can’t even have a proper conversation with ’em!”

“It’s not an ability. It’s muscle.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. See, I can’t have a conversation with you!”

“I don’t wanna hear that from the likes of you. Ready to go?”

Get in close and punch—that was the strategy I was best at, and it was my most powerful to boot. Brushing aside his earth magic counterattack, I rushed in toward Javagiir.

“Guh!”

“Too late.” Without giving Javagiir time to react, I punched him in the torso as hard as I could. Then, without even taking a breath, I rushed in for a follow-up. “HOOOOOAAAAHHHH!”

I delivered each and every punch with full force. I put my body and soul into every hit. And with every hit Javagiir took, more blood spilled from his mouth. He might’ve already gone unconscious. If he were a normal opponent, he would’ve been knocked out cold for sure.

But I knew battle, and my instincts told me that it wasn’t going to end like this.

Javagiir’s arms, legs, and torso—his body was so slender, but he started to emit an energy that didn’t match his physique. The sensation was different from anything I’d felt before, and I put some distance between us.

“Heh, not bad. Never thought you’d drive me into a corner like this.”

Javagiir stood, his body covered in blood. But from the way he was moving, he looked like a puppet being controlled by strings. It was as if his limbs were already broken. He clearly wasn’t standing up on his own power. Something *else* had taken over.

“Even *I* can’t control him. I had him sealed inside my body. But when my power weakens, he possesses me as he likes,” Javagiir lamented, almost self-deprecating.

It seemed he was only able to use his mouth; the spirit had already taken control of the rest of his body. And this spirit...it was strong. The energy his body radiated now was clearly different from that of the other black shadows. Even at this distance, I could feel it. It was like electricity shooting through me.

The intense air of intimidation penetrated me down to my very bones. It had to be a truly fiendish spirit, if even a master necromancer couldn't tame it. "So that's your trump card, huh?"

"I'm not sure I'd call it a trump card, honestly. I suppose if it *was* one...it'd be like drawing the Joker, baby. I can't say that I've won now that it's come to this, but—he he—you're sure as hell not gonna win either. Nothing to say but 'my condolences.' You're gonna die."

It was certainly true that this spirit was incredible. Having such deep-seated anger that you lingered on after death, all that sinister power... But that was all the credit I was gonna give him.

"I knew you had some kind of hidden power. I felt a different presence down in the depths of your heart...but I hid something from you too."

"Hid something? What?" asked Javagiir suspiciously.

I smiled, overjoyed to be fighting such a strong opponent. "Ain't it obvious? A trump card. Super Yuri Mode. *Activate.*"

An evil spirit that couldn't be controlled, even with necromancy? Oh, *yeah*. That was *perfect* for punching. Time to see who was stronger: his Joker or my trump card! I activated Super Yuri Mode.

A feeling of total elation, a sensation that I could do anything, surged throughout my body. I felt light, as if I had grown wings. With the limiter removed from my brain, my body could move more freely than usual. There was nothing stopping me now.

In the time it took Javagiir to step forward, I swooped around behind him.

"To free someone from possession, you gotta hit the back of the neck. That's what Filia said."

I swung my hand down on the back of Javagiir's neck, hitting him with a karate chop. He let out a cough and collapsed on the ground. His face was as pale as ever, but despite how he looked, he seemed pretty sturdy. He probably wasn't dead. Then—maybe because the evil spirit was so shocked from having been thwacked out of Javagiir's body—it plunged toward Filia's ranging wind wall.

Whoa—wouldn't that tear it to shreds? What in the heck was it doing?!

At that moment, the evil spirit broke through the wall of wind.

“It went through?! Crap, not good!”

I’d known it was a powerful spirit, but I hadn’t thought it was *that* powerful! Filia and Ashley were already fighting a great host of spirits outside the wall. If that mega-bad spirit joined up with them, the scales were definitely gonna tip the wrong way!

“Can’t let that happen!”

I rushed into the furious wind wall. It hurt, but not so much that I couldn’t bear it, thanks to my well-trained muscles. After bursting through, I scanned the area to assess the situation. Filia, Ashley, and Loli Loli were all covered in sweat, completely exhausted—and in front of the three of them loomed a black shadow the size of a mountain.

It seemed Ashley had managed to help Loli Loli regain consciousness with Filia’s help. But the situation was still highly unpredictable.

“I only took my eyes off it for a second, but...that spirit’s pretty gnarly, huh?”

“Yuri! You’re okay?!” shouted Filia, noticing me.

I ran over to the three of them, keeping my eye on the giant spirit. “Yeah. So, what’s the deal with that?”

“That spirit suddenly jumped out from the wind wall, absorbed all the other spirits in the area, and grew into a titan.”

It could absorb other spirits? That was a thing?!

Wait. Wait, this was *bad*. Because I’d failed to defeat it, now it was a downright beast...

“Oh, yeah, is Loli Loli okay?”

“A-okay, I would say! But I’m sorry, everyone. I dragged you all down...” Loli Loli sounded heartbroken.

“There’s nothin’ to be down about.”

We’d been completely blindsided by that attack. It would be totally unfair to expect her to just brush it off. And besides, if anyone was dragging the group down in this situation, it was me. I’d gotten us into this mess because I couldn’t cleanly defeat Javagiir.

“Groooaaah!”

The merged shadow, whose legs alone were taller than I was, took

a step forward. Even though its body didn't have any actual mass, it still gave off this powerfully oppressive presence. As I looked up at the spirit, Filia explained the situation.

"Ashley, Loli Loli, and I are out of magical energy. Frankly, Yuri, this battle...if it goes on much longer, we're going to have real problems."

Right, then. Maybe the reason that spirit had been able to get through Filia's wind wall was because her magical energy was almost exhausted. I frowned, but an impatient voice derailed my train of thought.

"This isn't the time to be talking about that!" said Ashley. "Now that our magical energy is used up, we should focus all of our efforts on getting everyone out of the village! If the old folks get attacked by that thing, they won't be able to protect themselves at all! We should leave a decoy and the others will help the rest of the villagers escape!"

Seeing as how the spirit seemed to be readying itself to go on a rampage—it didn't seem to possess any kind of intelligence whatsoever—I agreed with Ashley. Anything else would spell our defeat. The ever-talented Filia and Loli Loli agreed with Ashley as well.

"In that case, I'll be the decoy," said Filia. "You evacuate all the villagers!"

"No! I'm the one who dragged you all down!" shouted Loli Loli. "I'll be the decoy!"

"What are you two saying?" Ashley interrupted. "This is my village. The answer is obvious—I'll be the decoy."

Wow, they were gonna argue about this? Jeez, normal people would've wanted anything but to play bait for a monster shadow. And every second we wasted bickering, that same shadow lumbered closer and closer.

"Calm down, I still have a plan." I said.

"What are you saying, Yuri?! We have to hurry and get everyone out of here!"

"Yuri...?" Filia asked. My eyes met hers. She read my mind and nodded, not showing a hint of surprise. "Listen, you two. Please, believe in Yuri."

"Oh, I believe! Yuri is a strong guy!" said Loli Loli.

Ashley gritted her teeth and let out a short sigh. “If you die, I’m going to hold *such* a grudge, though! I don’t know what you’re gonna do, but you better beat it!”

Thanks for believing in me.

With that, I ran over to the Fire God idol and stood between it and the giant spirit, ready for the face-off. I had a little time left before Super Yuri Mode ran out—enough for one last shot. The spirit monster towered before me.

I smiled. “So, I gotta beat ya with magical energy, huh? Then I’ll give you everythin’ I got.”

If I only had one shot, then I was going to put everything I had into it, and the spirit could *bring it*.

“Hooooaaahhhh!”

Pushing my strength to the max, I punched the idol. The form of the Fire God, which had been maintained through fire magic, collapsed the moment it met my fist. The flames that formed the idol rumbled and shattered into sharp fragments like arrows—and flew in the direction of the giant spirit.

“Grooooooohh?!”

Flames enveloped the evil spirit. It let out screams of agony in its last moments as its body gradually became thinner and thinner. Then, at last, it completely disappeared from this world...

Exactly when my Super Yuri Mode ran out.

“Phew!” Man, it really was exhausting using that technique all the way until the last second of a fight. I still had lots of training to do.

“Um, Yuri,” said Ashley, “could you explain what just happened?”

“What just happened? Well, Filia said my attacks wouldn’t work unless they were filled with magical power, right? So I smacked the Fire God and sent it flying. By doing that, it gave my attack magical energy.”

“That’s amazing, Yuri!” Loli Loli cheered. “Even though you don’t have magical energy, you just smacked a physical body *made* of magic!”

“I *can* use magic though. Muscle magic.”

Filia grinned. “Yes, fine, muscle magic is magic.”

“Oh, you’re finally startin’ to get it, Filia!” I beat the spirit *and*

Filia was starting to understand? Talk about a happy ending!

“Whew.” I caught my breath. “I know this is weird for me, but I’d like to rest. Let’s just secure Javagiir first.”

I headed over toward Javagiir’s body, feeling completely drained. Most of his bones were broken and he was unconscious. It seemed like he was still alive, but he looked like he was in a lot of pain. If we just left him like this, he’d probably die.

“Filia, can you still use your recovery magic?”

“I think I can manage to at least keep him alive,” she replied.

Even if Javagiir was the culprit, it would’ve felt wrong to just let him die. Putting aside the fact that I’d killed in the heat of battle before, I didn’t really like the idea of just letting someone die a slow, torturous death. As Filia cast her recovery magic, Javagiir’s body was enveloped in a familiar white light.

Javagiir’s eyelids twitched. Moments later, his eyes opened fully, and he was glaring at me. “Hm?”

“You’re up, huh?” I was watching over Javagiir until the Knight Order arrived. Javagiir seemed to understand the situation right away, as he alternatively looked at me standing beside him, and down at himself, all tied up.

“So you beat *him* too, huh?” he asked.

“Guess so.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” he muttered. “Good work, greenhorn.”

In order to reduce the risk of Javagiir escaping, his bones hadn’t been fully healed. His voice was quiet and strained, as if he could feel every bone in his body creaking.

“The Knight Order will be here soon. When they do, they’ll arrest you.”

“Ah, guess there’s no getting around that. Hey, can I ask ya one thing?”

“What?”

“There’s a donut in my pocket. I want you to put it on my mouth. I know full well I’m not in a position to ask you anything, but can ya do that for me?”

“Donuts again?”

“Donuts again.”

Seriously, bringing up donuts now, in this situation? Wasn’t he maybe a little too obsessed? Still, as a sign of respect for his unwavering spirit, I took the donut out of Javagiir’s pocket.

“O-oh, hey, wait a minute!” Just as I was about to put the donut to his mouth, Javagiir cried out, flustered, as if he had just remembered something.

“What is it this time?”

“Before you put it on my mouth, can ya hold it up to my eye? It’s a full moon tonight, isn’t it? There’s nothing quite like looking at the full moon through a donut hole.”

“I don’t get it at all...”

But I didn’t have any choice. I held the donut over his eye, so that his line of sight was aimed through the donut hole.

“Wow...” Javagiir let out a sigh of completely contented admiration. “Huh. Tonight’s full moon looks even bigger.”

“You don’t need a donut hole to tell that.”

“You idiot, don’t ya know anything about elegance? It’s like the folks who hold up umbrellas on rainy days! It’s the same thing.”

What was the same?!

Anyway, he was finished looking at the moon, so I held the donut to his mouth. The moment I did so, Javagiir started darting his tongue in and out of the donut hole at rapid speed. That was close—I pulled my hand away just in time...

“Bleh! Bleeeeeh! Ahhhhhhhhhhh, this is the best! I can taste the moooooon!”

(No, he was absolutely not tasting the moon.)

“Whew, now *that* was a satisfying smoke,” said Javagiir. “Though the taste doesn’t quite suit someone as moderate as me.”

“Okay, first of all, that’s not what smoking is.” I’d never seen such

a bizarre “smoke” in my life.

Javagiir chuckled softly. He looked refreshed, somehow. “Thanks, greenhorn. Now I can go to jail without any worries.”

“If only you’d directed those feelings of yours in a different direction. Like toward muscle, you know?”

“You got a long way to go as an adventurer if you’re feeling sorry for criminals, greenhorn.”

“It’s not like I’m feelin’ sorry. It’s just...it’s a little bit disappointing, is all.” I’d wanted to have a fairer match against a guy with such passion in his heart.

At the far end of the road, illuminated by the light of the full moon, I could see the Knight Order had just arrived and were approaching. It would probably only take them a few more minutes to get here.

“Hey, everyone,” I shouted out to Filia, Ashley, and Loli Loli. “They’re here!”

We had decided in advance that all of us would be present for me to hand over Javagiir, just to make sure that everything went well.

Javagiir bowed deeply as I stood him up. “Sorry.”

“I’m not saying I forgive you, but...I do accept your apology,” said Ashley, looking Javagiir straight in the eye.

“I’m grateful just for that. Oh, and tell the owner of the shop I’m sorry as well,” said Javagiir. “My methods were wrong. I should have tried getting him to understand how good *real* donuts are. I just got so mad that the blood went to my head, and I couldn’t think of anything else but violent retribution.”

Finally, the knights reached us to retrieve the criminal.

“Welp,” said Javagiir, “see ya, greenhorns. Give it your best. Don’t just act big—walk tall.”

With that, the Knight Order took Javagiir away, leaving only those words behind.

Chapter 15: Festivals Are Fun

“**T**HANK YOU SO MUCH! Thanks to you, the shop and the village are safe!”

The next day, Moichi and the other villagers stood in front of the store to give us words of thanks. I just couldn't accept them.

“Yeah, but...” I glanced over at the place where the Fire God idol had been. The flames that had been burning in the shape of a giant humanoid had completely lost their form on account of me punching the figure. The villagers had worked so hard to prepare the Fire God for the festival today, and I'd destroyed it. Even though there was no other way I could've defeated that spirit, I still felt bad about it. In an instant, I'd annihilated everything they'd built.

“Nah, don't worry about the idol,” said Moichi.

“The Fire God helped you in the fight, didn't it? I think the Fire God helped us villagers too. Not a single one of us holds a grudge. We're grateful to you, from the bottom of our hearts.”

“Moichi...sorry.” I felt both grateful and apologetic toward these folks, for all of their big, gracious smiles.

Then something happened.

“Ahem.” The cute, theatrical coughing came from Filia, and it grabbed our attention. “Have you forgotten about me? The transcendently beautiful elf, Filia?” She patted her chest lightly, and continued speaking proudly. “Now that I've rested and my magical energy has returned, I think that we can return the idol to its prior state. If we all work together, that is.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quite serious. Because I *am* amazing,” said Filia, casually.

Well, Filia was pretty exceptional at all matters arcane. She'd learned a wide range of magic outside of combat utility, so it didn't surprise me that she could do something like this. As the villagers buzzed with excitement over this sudden development, Filia raised her

right hand high.

“Do you want to make a Fire God idol?!” she asked.

“Y-yeah!” shouted the villagers.

“Will you trust in the instructions that I give you, so that we can do just that?!”

“Yeah!”

“Then it’s settled! Let’s all work together to remake the Fire God!”

“Yeaah!”

After hyping up the villagers, Filia turned to me and smiled. “We’ll definitely put it back to normal—no, we’ll make it even better than before. Now, Yuri, will you stop being so hard on yourself?”

“Did you...read my mind?” Maybe she’d used her Clairvoyance to see how responsible I felt for it.

She shook her head from side to side. “No, not at all. I could tell from looking at your face. I *am* your partner, Yuri.”

“Uh...Filia?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

“Eh he he. Yuri, we haven’t even gotten started!” said Filia, with a teasing smile. She then began to give instructions on how to rebuild the idol.

Maybe it was her charisma, but Filia was able to bring people together *and* keep the work proceeding smoothly. Ashley, who was proficient with fire magic, helped out. And Loli Loli, who the villagers now loved like a grandchild, entertained the old folks by talking to them. Since I didn’t have any magical energy, I couldn’t help with making the Fire God, so I handled the heavy lifting.

Each one of us did what we could, and the idol was completed before noon.

“Oh, it’s amazing...”

“I never imagined we’d be able to do it!”

“Thank you, Filia, this is all thanks to you!”

“You’re really quite something, Filia!”

The villagers all offered words of praise to Filia, commenting on how even though we had only spent a few hours on it, the quality of this idol was every bit as good as the original.

“Oh, no, you’re all overreacting,” said Filia, all modest, waving her hands in front of her chest. I walked up to her. “Ah, Yuri.”

“Now I’ll thank you, Filia. Thanks to you, I can participate in the festival without feeling awkward. And that’s all because of you.”

“Eh he he! I suppose it is, mm!”

“I’ll get you a good starter dumbbell as thanks.”

“That’s the wrong choice, Yuri!”

The wrong choice? Oh, I should’ve known a starter wouldn’t be enough. I took out a way bigger dumbbell and held it out in front of her. “In that case, as a special occasion, I’ll give you my favorite dumbbell, the one I use most often. If you swallow it, you can train your stomach *and* your body at the same time.”

“I’d say you had a screw loose, Yuri, but I don’t think you’ve ever had screws.”

“Course I don’t have any screws. I’m a human being!”

“Yes, that’s exactly the answer I’d expect.”

In the end, Filia didn’t accept the dumbbell. Hm, maybe there was something wrong with it? But I couldn’t think of any particular reason why that might be. Afterward, I consulted with Loli Loli and Ashley. The two of them shrugged at the exact same time after they heard my story.

“Even I am utterly stunned by you, Yuri...you need to get a grip, understand?”

“That bad?”

“Listen, Yuri. A gift should be something the recipient wants.”

“I see. Thanks, you two. This has been educational.” I carved what they told me into my mind. In the name of gentle muscle men everywhere, I wasn’t going to make a mistake the next time!

Time had passed and it had grown dark. Ashley led us to the Fire God idol, and we gathered with everyone there. The rest of the villagers were already there, and the square around the idol was really hopping.

“Everyone! It’s time for the festivaaaaal!” shouted Moichi, his loud voice kicking off the festivities.

“Yaaaaaahh!” the whole village cried in unison.

After Moichi signaled the start, people scattered all over the village like scurrying little spiders. It was an odd way to start things off, but I didn’t *dislike* it. We’d decided that the four of us would stick together, so we slowly walked through the festival site.

Lamps, lit up with fire and lightning magic, were placed every ten, fifteen feet or so. They illuminated the village, splashing it with vivid color. It was an extraordinary sight, as if the village itself had become some kind of theme park. When I looked to my side, I saw that Filia—who was walking next to me—looked pretty hyped.

“You’re feeling pretty festive yourself, huh, Filia?”

“Yes! I’ll be able to make so many strange noises without worrying about people looking at me.”

“I-I see.” I flinched a bit at Filia’s response. Did Filia have a secret, deep darkness within? Was she...was she under a lot of stress?

“Err. If you’re worried about stuff, I don’t mind listening.”

“No, I was just joking!” she snapped.

What? What kinda joke was *that*? “Stop makin’ jokes that are hard to understand.”

“I thought you were being serious too,” said Ashley.

“What? You were fibbing?!” shouted Loli Loli. “Had me tooootally fooled!”

Filia seemed shocked at that. Ashley just shook her head. “Big Sis tends to keep a lot of things to herself. Yuri, make sure you support Sis properly!”

“Of course.”

“Okay then, that’s good. Ooooh, over there!” Ashley pointed toward a corner of the village. There was a particularly large crowd of people gathered there.

“What’s going on over there?”

“That’s where people show off special performances! And anyone can jump in and do it. You don’t have to sign up or anything.”

“Oh! Performance!” Loli Loli was practically jumping up and down. “I wanna see! I wanna go!”

We headed over, Ashley and Loli Loli pulling us along. Just as Ashley had said, there were all sorts of people giving performances. There were tons of really unique skills on display, like someone sending lightning magic through their body to make their body glow, or someone using earth magic to make a giant sphere of mud. They were really interesting!

“Everyone’s so amazing,” said Filia quietly.

Next to Filia, a girl was trembling with excitement—Ashley. “Oh, no, after seeing that, I just can’t hold it in anymore...sorry, you guys, but I’m jumping in!”

With that, Ashley ran at incredible speed toward the center of the crowd. It seemed like she was a festival girl through and through; it was in her veins.

“Alllll right!” Ashley announced. “I’m gonna do something too!” As she did, she conjured a gigantic fire dragon with her fire magic. Then she hopped onto the dragon and flew up into the sky.

“Whoa!”

“What was that?!”

“Eyyyy, that’s Ashley! Atta girl!”

As the crowd cheered, the fire dragon Ashley controlled began to soar and weave with even more intensity. Ashley, riding on the dragon’s head, was clearly having fun as she looked down at us. She shone with brightness and cheer.

“You’re so incredibly brave, Ashley,” called Filia. “I can’t even think of—Yuri?”

“I can’t lose!”

“Huh?”

After seeing something that amazing, I couldn’t just sit there and be quiet! I had to jump in too—but I didn’t know how to perform. What could I do? I had to think of something! Then inspiration struck like a

punch. I borrowed a thick black marker from one of the people in the crowd, released my muscles, and drew a face on my belly.

Yeah. Yeah, this rocked. “Voila.”

“Y-Yuri?! What—why—huh?!”

“It’s a ‘belly dance,’” I explained. “By drawing a face on my belly and making it dance, I’m essentially displaying my skills to the crowd. I thought this would be a good way for me to show off my muscles!”

I moved my abdominal muscles freely, making the face on my belly look like it was changing expressions. No one should make light of the humble belly dance. Besides, my belly dancing was clearly different from your run-of-the-mill *normie* belly dance, all thanks to my well-trained muscles. My fine, supple muscles could move freely, and thereby be used to create a variety of expressions.

“Pfft! Tee hee hee! Pfffhssss! St-stop, enough!”

“Oh, that’s amazing, Yuri!”

In an instant, Filia was crouching down, clutching her stomach, while Loli Loli looked like she was keenly interested in what I was doing. I knew I’d made the right choice. This trick would be a great way to get people interested in muscles! Especially if they looked at it long enough. My plan to propagate the word of muscle was sure to proceed without a hitch. On top of that, it was fun. This plan killed two birds with one stone.

Such an ingenious strategy was only natural for me, an intellectual muscle man. Having gained confidence from their reactions, I followed Ashley’s example and jumped into the middle of the circle of people. It was time to get started. With this, there was no way I could lose to Ashley!

“What is that? What’s going on?”

“What in the world is he going to do?”

The villagers made a lot of bewildered sounds. All right, well—they were confused now, but I had their attention. They couldn’t take their eyes off of my inflated, bulging muscles. So, while they were still looking at me, I resumed belly dancing. Rectus abdominis, oblique abdominal, transverse abdominis—I moved my abs in intricate patterns in order to convey the sublime goodness of muscle.

“Nice, nice! More!”

“This is gettin’ kinda exciting! What’s going on?”

I continued belly dancing, now with serious effort. But Ashley’s dragon seemed to be attracting more looks because of its flashy appearance. No way could I let myself be defeated like this!

“In that case...how about this?” I wiggled around, twisting my body as I danced. I used the air itself as a foothold so that I could freely use the space in the wide-open sky above and started jumping around. I moved so fast that a countless number of afterimages of myself flew through the air as well, right in front of the audience. This allowed me to be seen even from afar, and my movements looked even flashier! More importantly, the increase in number was a big advantage.

“Wha?! Yuri, what are you doing?” shouted Ashley from atop the dragon’s head.

I called back to her as I moved my legs so fast that they were invisible in order to stay in the air. “I’m not gonna lose to you, Ashley!”

“No! It’s not about losing or winning, I’m asking you what you’re doing! It’s super scary!”

Scary? Ha! “Aww, you scared, Ashley? In that case, I’ll take the win!”

“My words aren’t getting through—but if it’s a showdown you want, you got it!” shouted Ashley, and the dragon she was riding made a beautiful loop in the air.

The spectators below erupted into loud cheers. Atta girl, Ashley. She was definitely a worthy opponent.

“Oho! So, little girl, you’re challenging me? That’s the spirit. Bring it!”

“How can you try and show off when you’re looking like *that*? Well, you’ve got guts, I’ll give you that!”

I activated Super Yuri Mode and increased the number of afterimages even further. My movements left everyone who saw them dumbstruck, amazed, and the people down on the ground responded with thunderous applause. The crowd was incredibly excited as they watched us. A little further away from the rest of the crowd, I saw Filia and Loli Loli watching us too.

“You two are great!”

“Keep it up!”

Cheers of encouragement came from all over. All right, this was getting exciting. This would definitely spread the good word of muscle!

We danced, danced, and kept dancing. I didn't really care about things like winning or pleasing the crowd anymore. Dancing itself was the goal! I was dancing just to dance with a girl. After we hit our limits and used up all of our energy, we stopped our performance at the exact same time and descended to the ground.

When we landed, I laid down right there on the road. The coolness of the earth felt wonderfully soothing to my burning hot skin and muscles. A pleasant numbness enveloped my entire body.

“Hey, Yuri...” said Ashley, smiling radiantly. “You weren't bad.”

“Right back atcha, Ashley. I honestly didn't think you'd hang in there that long.”

Right then, I felt like I really connected with Ashley—that we understood each other. I stood up and reached out my hand. Ashley stood and took it, shaking my hand. The area around us was filled with thunderous applause. For some reason, I felt...super good. Really *happy*.

After our performance, we went to check out the festival stalls with Filia and Loli Loli. There were a ton of things I had never seen before. I was intrigued.

“Hey, Ashley, what's that?”

“Oh, that? That's a glowing water balloon.”

“Water balloon?!” I echoed.

“*Glowing!*” she said.

“Amazing!”

“Yep!”

Ashley and I nodded to each other rapidly.

“Yuri, Ashley, you two are so close! I think it's wonderful!” said Loli Loli.

“Hm, I do feel like you two are both oddly excited. Was it because of your contest?” asked Filia.

“Sure, there's that,” said Ashley, “but it's also because you gotta enjoy the festival! It's more fun when you get along with each other!”

“Well said! Hey, Loli Loli, Filia?! Ashley just made a really good point just now!”

“Hee hee! Of course I did! So put a little respect on the name, okay?” said Ashley proudly, puffing out her chest.

The atmosphere of the festival was just incredible. And it was the closest Ashley and I had been since we’d met, so I was gonna enjoy it. As Ashley said, it’s obviously more fun to get along than the other way around.

“This is fun, Filia!”

Filia cocked her head at me. “Are you drunk, by any chance?”

I flexed my biceps. “Drunk on *muscle*?”

“On alcohol.”

I changed my stance, now showing off my pecs. “You mean off of *these* muscles?”

“No, I’m referring to alcohol.”

Muscles were part of it, but no—I wasn’t drunk on alcohol. But I might’ve been a little drunk off the atmosphere. That was all right! It’s good to have a day where you just cut loose now and again.

“That’s true, I suppose,” said Filia, agreeing with me after peeking into my mind.

We took our time milling through the festival, checking out the stalls one by one.

“Can I ask something?” Loli Loli said.

“What’s the matter, Loli Loli?”

“I’m hungry! I feel like I want to eat!” She rubbed her tummy in circles.

Yeah. Come to think of it, we hadn’t eaten dinner. And I had spent quite a long time belly dancing too. It was nighttime, so it was perfectly understandable that Loli Loli was hungry.

“That’s a great idea, Loli Loli!” said Filia. “Let’s look for something to eat right away!”

“Oh? Filia, did your eyes just light up? Are you a glutton after all, huh?”

“I-I’m not a glutton, okay?” she said, which wasn’t too convincing

because I could practically hear her drooling.

Well, we were all hungry, so we looked around for the food stalls. We bought all sorts of stuff like yakisoba and chocolate-covered bananas and ate them together. Loli Loli was curious about pretty much everything, but she was especially interested in the cotton candy.

“What is this?! It’s sweet and sticky!” she exclaimed. She put her hand over her mouth, her eyes sparkling. Then she clapped her hands together and laughed at the sticky sensation.

She was so innocent. I didn’t really remember anymore, but had there been a time when I was like that too? Upon seeing Loli Loli, Ashley and Filia crouched in front of her like they were her mothers.

“Aw, jeez,” said Ashley. “Here, I’ll wash your hands.”

“It’s cold!” said Loli Loli.

Ashley’s water magic washed away the sticky residue on Loli Loli’s hands.

“We’ll wipe your mouth too, okay?” said Filia.

“Okay!”

Filia wiped around Loli Loli’s mouth using her handkerchief, and finally she was completely clean. “You’re both so nice! Thank you!” said Loli Loli, thanking them with a big grin on her face.

It was a heartwarming sight, but...I felt like I should do something too. But what could I do? Wait—

“Wanna ride on my shoulders?” I asked.

“Oh! Yes!”

Loli Loli hopped onto my back. I could hardly feel her weight at all. Compared to the huge boulders I lifted during my usual training, she was light as a feather.

“I’m so high up, Yuri! I can see so much!”

“Glad to hear it. What can ya see?”

“Hm? Let’s see... Ah, Moichi is there!” Loli Loli pointed over at Moichi. He’d set up a food stall as well, and it seemed like a good time to drop by.

“Yo! You guys all having fun, Ashley?” asked Moichi, smiling. He seemed busy, but he also seemed to be having fun. But he wasn’t selling

his usual product, the Donuts Sans Holes—he was selling squid skewers.

“No donuts today?” I asked.

“Come on, ya idiot! It’s in the rules, you *gotta* have squid skewers at a festival!”

“What rule is that? I never heard that before.”

Moichi refused to let us pay and practically forced the squid skewers into our hands.

“Oooh, these are *good*.”

When we left him, we continued to wander around the festival, eating all the way.

A while later, we found another interesting stall.

“A spray that can change the color of your shadow...sounds interesting.”

You could choose from dozens of color variations, and if you sprayed your shadow with it, it would actually change to that color! The technique was based on lightning magic, but it was deployed by a magic tool that utilized some more complicated principles, none of which I understood. Apparently, it used some kind of amazing theory driving innovative technology or whatever.

Ashley picked the red spray without a moment’s hesitation and dyed her shadow red.

“I’m red!” Ashley exclaimed.

“I knew it,” I said. Honestly, I would’ve been shocked if she’d picked anything else.

“How did you know?” asked Ashley. “Wait...you’re not, like, stalking me or anything, are you?”

“Aaahhh! Yuri, you’re the worst!” shouted Filia.

“Anyone could tell you were going to choose red. Your clothes are all the same color!” I shot back, narrowing my eyes and nodding at her outfit.

Today, Ashley was wearing a red coat, a red shirt, and red shorts. It was like she was no longer Ashley but a creature of pure redness.

“Well, whatever,” said Ashley, proudly showing off her clothes. “You’re just jealous.”

“What am I supposed to be jealous of?” I had no idea what she was getting at.

Loli Loli went next. She grabbed the spray with her tiny hands and sprayed her shadow. “I’m blue!” Just like that, Loli Loli had dyed her shadow blue. “It’s because my eyes are blue! I really like it!”

“It really suits you,” said Ashley.

“Really? You’re not just flattering me?” asked Loli Loli.

“No, I agree,” said Filia.

I nodded. “Me too.”

“Eh he he! I’m so happy! I’m happy to be alive!”

Jeez, that was a *lot* of happy. I couldn’t help but chuckle. It felt nice to see someone just cut loose a bit. I could understand why Loli Loli was so well liked by the old folks in the village. I mean, there wasn’t anyone who could hate her, really. Loli Loli could probably get along just fine anywhere in the entire world.

“I’m so happy that I’m jumping for joy!” she exclaimed. “Hop, hop! Ah ha ha!”

Though she *did* seem a little strange, now and again.

“Now, what am I gonna do?” I wondered.

Ashley and Loli Loli had made their decision, so it was about time I made mine. There were so many colors to pick from that it was kind of hard to choose, and I almost picked something at random. But we were finally at the festival, so I had to choose the right one.

After agonizing over it for a little bit, I picked out one of the sprays, dyed my shadow, and it turned that one solid color.

When Filia saw my shadow, she looked at me with surprise. “Huh? Yuri, you’re pink? That’s kind of unexpected.”

Yep, I was pink! Or peach, you could say. But there was a very good reason for this. “I made it the color of muscle. Muscles are mostly red or white.”

I’m an intellectual, so I knew what I was talking about. If you mixed red and white, you got pink.

“You say that I’m all red,” said Ashley, “but *you’re* all muscle.”

“Well, yeah, I’m a human being!”

Ashley blinked. "I don't feel like that makes sense?"

Muscles were essential for humans, though. Couldn't she see that?

"It suits you, Yuri! I think you look kinda cool!"

"Oh, thanks, Loli Loli!"

"Don't worry, Yuri, it's just a trick of the imagination!" she said, throwing out a fist bump.

"A trick of the what...?"

Even if she'd thrown out a fist bump like that, I wasn't sure I should just be happy about that. Anyway, the three of us had changed the color of our shadows. The last one left was Filia. Come to think of it, Filia did tend to spend a lot of time looking for fashionable things, like with her clothes.

"Hmm. I've decided!" announced Filia. "I didn't want to keep you waiting for too long."

But today, it seemed like she'd decided rather easily. Filia sprayed her shadow vigorously, changing its color. The color she chose was a pure white.

"Ta-da!" Filia opened her arms wide, showing off her shadow.

"Oh, that really suits you! I'm totally convinced, it was a success!" said Loli Loli.

"Eh he he! Thank you, Loli Loli. I am pure and innocent, so I made it white."

Pure and innocent? Uh, *that* was a heck of a thing to hear from Filia of all people.

"White! That's just perfect for you, Big Sis, so pure and innocent!"

"Ashley. I'm sure that Filia has you ensorcelled with some kind of illusion magic," I said, shaking my head.

Filia pouted. "How rude! I can't use that kind of magic. And even if I could, I wouldn't use it on anyone except you, Yuri!"

"You'd use it on *me*?!"

"You hear that, Yuri? See, Big Sis is pure and innocent after all!"

"No, did you actually listen to what she said? She just said she'd use it on me!"

“If it’s on you, it’s okay. Because of muscle,” she replied.

Because of muscle? *What?*

Ashley gave me a teasing look. “Besides, you’d be happy if she did anyway, right? You’d be all like, ‘I’ll train so I can handle illusions!’”

“Huh. You really do know me well. Good point.” Finally, Ashley was beginning to understand me!

“Yuri, you’re weird! Funny!” exclaimed Loli Loli.

“I’m not weird. I’m normal!”

“Yuri said that he thinks he’s normal. Loli Loli, what do you think?” asked Ashley.

“Hmm. Nope! Don’t think so!” Loli Loli cut me so deep, but she kept on giggling! “But he’s a good guy! I like Yuri! Ashley, do you dislike him?”

Ashley didn’t expect to have that question thrown at her. She stammered a bit, going, “H-huh? M-me?” while pointing at herself, her eyes wide in surprise. She thought for a moment. “Well...no, I don’t dislike him.”

“Then that’s good! And Filia loves Yuri, so then everyone is friends!” said Loli Loli.

“Huh? W-wait a minute,” Filia stammered, “why do you say I love Yuri?!”

“It’s obvious!”

“I-It’s obvious?!”

“Besides, if you didn’t like him, then you wouldn’t be with him, right?”

“W-well, I suppose so, but...”

“So, you like him then!”

Pressed by Loli Loli’s strong, decisive tone of voice, Filia just gave a small nod. “Yes, well...that’s true...I do like him,” she said, averting her eyes from me as if embarrassed.

I was at a bit of a loss over that reaction.

“It’s good that everyone likes you, Yuri!” said Loli Loli.

“Y-yeah.” Uh, I supposed! I just...wouldn’t think too deeply on

that one. I'd just follow Loli Loli's lead and keep it simple. It was good to be liked!

Time really does fly when you're having fun. Night fell around us, and the moon, which had been just barely visible when the festival began, was now floating right up there in the middle of the sky. From the look of it, the closing ceremonies were about to take place. In a few minutes, all the stalls would be closed.

Considering there wasn't much time left, the next stall we visited would be our last.

The stall we ended up choosing was a shooting gallery game. There were various prizes of various sizes lined up, mainly stuffed animals and the like. If you knocked down a prize with the toy gun, you'd win that prize. The spot where you stood was only thirty feet or so away from where the prizes were lined up. At first I thought it would be easy, but...

"I thought for sure I would get something!" wailed Ashley.

"Agh, me too!" cried Loli Loli.

Ashley and Loli Loli let out some truly agonized cries.

"I'm sorry, Ashley, Loli Loli. I wish I could've won something for you both, but..." Filia sighed. All three of them had failed.

The gun was many times smaller than you would think, and it really didn't shoot as well as you'd hope. Also, the bullets were practically as light as air, so even if you were fortunate enough to actually hit one of the prizes, the crappy little gun couldn't knock it down. I looked over at the shelf where the prizes were displayed. It seemed like Ashley wanted a hippopotamus plushie, and Loli Loli wanted some kind of figure that I couldn't wrap my head around? It was some kind of twisted screw thingy.

"Ooh!" Ashley groaned.

"Whoa, whoa, jeez! Ashley, is it that big of a deal?"

"Yes, it is that big of a deal! Just look over there!" she replied, pointing to a deformed hippopotamus plushie. At once, I understood why Ashley was so worked up about it. What the heck—it was bright red!

“She’s waiting for me!” Ashley moaned. “Yet I can’t embrace her in my arms...”

“Huh, okay...” Her fixation on the color red had almost become some kind of delusion.

Hm. I crossed my arms and thought to myself. I didn’t want to let our day at the festival end like this!

“All right. I’ll do it. Ashley, Loli Loli. Leave it to me. I’ll get ya the things ya want.” As they say, all’s well that ends well, so I was going to make sure it ended well. I stood facing straight at the shelf with the prizes.

“Heh, ‘Leave it to me,’ says the amateur who can’t even spell shootin’,” said the man with a long, thin face who was running the stall.

“I do too know the first thing. I know the whole thing! You write it like ‘s-h-o-o-t-i-n-g.’ Like that!” Come on, he shouldn’t have even tried to make fun of me. I’m an intellectual muscle man! I traced the outline of the letters in the air with my finger. “See? I do know it.”

“That’s not what I meant! Well, whatever. If ya think ya can win something, try and get it!”

“Okay, but before I try, I have a question. Do I have to use this gun?”

The man running the stall gave me a puzzled look. “Huh? If you’re not usin’ the gun, then how’re ya gonna get a prize?”

“I’ll throw the bullet with my bare hands.”

“Ha ha ha! You’re a funny guy! All right!”

How generous! The guy had a big heart, thank goodness.

“All right, here I go!” I held the bullet in my hand and relaxed, focusing my conscious mind on my body.

“If ya think you can knock ’em down by throwin’, just go ahead!” said the man.

“Feast your eyes on the essence of muscle magic.” I focused all my attention on my fist. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. No thoughts. No consciousness. “...Phew.”

I cleared my mind and locked my eyes on the prizes lined up on the shelf. I wound up...and threw.

In the next instant, a thunderous sound filled the area. The shock wave created by the bullet exceeding the speed of sound didn't just blow away all of the prizes lined up on the shelf, it also blew away the shelf itself. Yeah, that was a good hit.

"Wh-what in the world was *that*...?"

"I told you, didn't I? Muscle magic." While the man running the stall was stunned, I selected only the prizes that I needed and put them in the bag of holding at my waist. "I don't want the rest of 'em. Don't need 'em."

If I took *all* the prizes home with me, then the guy would probably be out of business.

"Th-thanks?" said the man.

Then I returned to the three girls. "Here ya go."

First, I gave Ashley the red hippopotamus plushie she'd wanted.

"Th-thank you..."

"Yep." She was surprisingly proper when it came to this kind of thing. She must've been raised well. Maybe my thoughts were showing on my face or something, because Ashley quickly turned away from me. "D-don't get the wrong idea or anything! It's not like you're gonna win me over so easily with this!"

I guessed she wasn't quite as simple as Filia.

"But your likability *is* rising rapidly!"

So maybe a *little* simple.

"Anyway... The more I look at it, the cuter this stuffed animal gets!" she exclaimed, and happily hugged it.

If she was that happy, then it was worth the effort! Next, I turned to Loli Loli.

"Loli Loli, I have this for you. Here."

I handed her the figure that looked like some kind of twisted screw. It looked like a work of art, but...it also kinda looked like junk.

"Wow! Thank you!" she exclaimed, hopping around happily. Then, she gently patted the figure. "Such an incredible form! The deviation value is so high!"

"I-I see."

I had absolutely no clue what she was talking about. But judging from the look on her face, she certainly seemed happy. I had no idea what that figure was worth, but if it made Loli Loli happy, then I was glad. I wanted the festival to end on a high note for her.

At last, the stalls closed.

We gathered in front of the Fire God idol once again.

“The festival was *super* fun! I just couldn’t help but get totally carried away with excitement!” said Loli Loli.

“Your village has a completely different way of celebrating than mine does. It was quite a lot of fun,” said Filia.

“It was a great festival,” I added.

Ashley seemed happy to hear it. “I know, right? Oh, the prayer is about to begin! From this point on, please listen quietly.” She held her finger up to her mouth.

“We’ll now offer a prayer to Fire God. Everyone, please listen quietly!” called Moichi, now clad in red clothing. He’d changed at some point when we weren’t looking. He now stood with the villagers, facing the Fire God idol.

“Long ago, in ancient times...before humanity appeared in this world, there existed Five Great Gods,” said Moichi. He spoke in a deep voice, light-years from the cheerful, casual way he’d spoken up until this point.

“The Five Gods, with their merciful, benevolent hearts, created us—the five races. The Water God made the mer-people, the Wind God made the elves, the Earth God made the dwarves, the Lightning God made the beastmen, and the Fire God made humans. We, born of the Five Gods, have recognized one another as brothers and sisters, cooperated with one another, and have lived in peace together. For a time there were also other living creatures, ‘animals,’ which are now almost completely extinct.”

I wondered if the wind had started blowing, because the Fire God idol was gently swaying.

“However, those happy days were shattered when the Dark God appeared. The Dark God created monsters and majin, the beings from the so-called race of demons. These wicked creatures antagonized the

five races, and chaos engulfed the world. The Five Gods were unhappy with this turn, and they challenged the Dark God in battle. The power of the Dark God was incredible, but the Five Great Gods succeeded in striking and destroying their foe. However, the Five Gods also suffered terrible wounds, and they disappeared. But thanks to their sacrifice, the demons lost their power, and the world was once again at peace.”

Moichi paused for a moment and looked back at us.

“Everyone! Let us express our deepest gratitude to the gods who created us and who protect the world! I ask for a minute of prayer.”

A minute. During that time, no one uttered a word. There was only silence.

“Thus concludes our prayers to the Five Gods.”

After bowing to the Fire God idol, Moichi tossed the red robe he was wearing into the flames. That was probably the signal for the end of the ceremony, because after that, Moichi seemed like he was back to his usual self.

“Phew! I was so nervous.”

But the villagers cheered him on.

“That was great!”

“Hey, you did pretty good for your first time!”

Moichi walked over to Loli Loli. His relaxed expression stiffened once again. “I’m really sorry to have spoken ill of you, Loli Loli—and of your god. It’s a tradition that’s been passed down from generation to generation, so it’s not like we can change the words so easily.”

Come to think of it, I had heard something like that before about how the majin were born from the Dark God. I wondered what Loli Loli thought about that.

“It’s okay! It was refreshing to hear something different from what my father is always telling me!” she replied. It seemed like she didn’t mind at all.

Actually, if anything, her mental fortitude really was incredible. Something to shoot for myself, maybe!

“Thanks,” said Moichi, “I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” said Ashley. “The festival’s still not over! There’s still one thing left to do!”

“Oh, yeah! That’s right! It’s not a festival if you don’t see *that!*” replied Moichi.

Huh, so there was still some kind of attraction left.

“What is ‘that?’” I asked.

“You’ll see,” said Ashley, gazing at the idol. “Watch. And don’t take your eyes off of it.”

The red robe that Moichi had thrown into the fire was already half gone. It was burning, burning, and...finally was nothing but ash. At that moment, flames erupted from the Fire God idol. The flames shot skyward and instantly stretched out high into the heavens, illuminating the village as brightly as daylight.

“It’s just fantastic, isn’t it?” Ashley murmured.

“Yeah!” said Loli Loli. “It’s just like fwwoooooom! Whooooosh!”

“He he, I know, right? There’s nothing like seeing a good flame burning, it’s just the best!”

If someone heard Ashley say that out of context, they’d think she was nuts.

Anyway, as flames continued to roar, the Fire God idol gradually grew smaller and smaller, and eventually, the flames vanished.

“And now the festival is over. Did you have fun?” asked Ashley.

“I did!” said Loli Loli. “It’s really a shame that I’ve gone so long without knowing anything about this! It makes me want to ask myself, just what the heck have I been doing with the years I’ve been living?!”

Filia nodded. “It was a wonderful festival. Everyone in the village is so kind too. It’s a nice place.”

“I really had fun,” I added.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that,” said Ashley, smiling, seeming relieved at our reactions.

“Whooooooooooo!” Moichi shouted in a voice that carried across the village. “All right, everyone! Eat and drink all ya want! Time to begin the feast after the festival!”

The noise and excitement didn’t die down, even late into the night.

By the time we got back to Ashley's house, it was *extremely* late at night. Filia and I put Loli Loli and Ashley to bed on the living room sofa. Both of them were incredibly exhausted and super sleepy. Filia and I let out a simultaneous heavy sigh.

"I'll get us something to drink," said Filia.

"Oh, thanks."

Filia poured some drinks into cups and sat down next to me. We were so close that our hands were almost touching. Filia's faintly sweet scent tickled my nostrils. "I'm really glad that Ashley and Loli Loli were so happy," she said.

"Yeah, I'm relieved."

"By the way, Yuri, I was just wondering..." Filia touched the tips of her fingers together, her hands in front of her chest. Then she brought her hand up to her light pink lips, and for a moment, gave me a pouting look. "Aren't you going to give *me* anything? I'm so jealous of the other two!"

Then she beamed. "Eh he...just kidding! What a thing to say," she said, smiling brightly.

I stared back at her intently.

"Yuri, I was joking, okay? Joking! Did I fool you? Or...is something the matter? I guess you just want to stare at the transcendently beautiful elf, Filia, eh? Ah, Yuri, I should've known! Okay, okay, you can look!" She gave me her usual teasing look and poked me in the forehead, putting on a little act.

"Well, actually, I did get something for you. Here." I took a stuffed animal out of the bag of holding at my waist. It was a hefty boy, almost as big as Filia's waist.

"Um...huh?"

"You wanted it, didn't you? You kept glancing at it out of the corner of your eye."

I was positive that I'd seen Filia looking at the stuffed bear with a wistful look in her eyes, even as she had been trying to win the prizes for Ashley and Loli Loli. So I'd put the advice Ashley had given me into

practice: You have to give a gift that your recipient really wants. I'd been watching Filia throughout the day, and this was the one I'd noticed.

When Filia saw the stuffed animal in my hands, she froze for a few seconds and just stared at it silently. She was probably overcome with happiness, right? But just as I was thinking that, Filia opened her mouth to speak, though it looked like she was having trouble getting the words out.

"I, uh. I wonder if maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but...it was actually the small stuffed animal next to this one that I was looking at... maybe?"

Wait, really? I mean, sure, there had been a small stuffed bear next to this one, but I'd thought for sure that the big one would be better. "Oh. I...I'm sorry."

"N-no, it's okay! I suppose realistically, the smaller one would've been easier to get, but the larger one is cuter, so it's okay! But, ah...are you sure you're okay giving this to me?"

So that was it. Did she really feel the big one was better or was she just trying to spare my feelings? Judging from how she fidgeted, fidgeting with the hem of her dress, I didn't think she *didn't* want it. Right?

"You're always doing so much for me," I said. "Besides, I got this for you, Filia. Because, well...because."

"Th-thank you very much..." She was about to reach and grab it, but suddenly stopped. "You didn't put a dumbbell inside this or anything, did you?"

"Like hell I would!" I snapped. Jeez, who did she think I was? "Anyway...here."

I was feeling kind of embarrassed from being teased, so I just handed the plushie over brusquely.

Filia took the bear carefully with both hands and hugged it tight with both arms. "Thank you very much, Yuri. I'm really, really happy... Tee hee hee!"

Filia bowed graciously to me, at the same time using her hands to make the plushie bow as well. She wore a shy, bashful look. When I saw that expression, my heart started to beat faster. Thanks to my extensive

training, I *should* have been able to control every part of my body at will, but as soon as Filia's smile entered my field of view, I just completely lost control.

I was utterly unable to pull my eyes away from her face, so I just kept staring...and I could tell that she was starting to blush, her face going bright red in the blink of an eye.

"Yuri, when you stare at me like that, it...it's rather embarrassing," she squeaked in a small voice, her face thoroughly red. Even her ears were red.

"S-sorry." I somehow managed to regain control of my body, and I vigorously averted my eyes.

Then I noticed Loli Loli and Ashley both had their eyes wide open.

"They're flirting!" whispered Loli Loli.

"Ah, Loli Loli, you dummy!" Ashley snapped. "Now they know we're awake!"

As if their eyes being wide open wasn't a clue?

"Y-you're awake?!" Filia stammered. "I-If you were awake, you need to—you should have told me!"

"Y-yeah!" I said. "I'm shocked! Shocked, I say!"

"Hmm..." Ashley grinned at our protests. Damn it, why did she have to keep smiling like that?! I thought desperately for a retort, but my brain was mush.

Then Loli Loli tilted her head to the side. "Hey, hey! How many kids do you want to have?" she asked.

"H-hey!" I protested.

"K-kids..." Filia murmured.

The embarrassment was too much and, just like that, Filia completely shut down for the night.

Chapter 16: Farewells

WE STAYED IN THE VILLAGE for a few days, but the time had finally come for us to return to Jeepupp. Also, Loli Loli had decided to go back home to the Demon Kingdom.

“I’m sure my father will get super worried if I don’t come back soon! It’s really tough being the child of a doting parent!” she sang.

“I’m sure your father has it a whole lot tougher, being the father of such a rambunctious kid,” I teased.

Since we were all heading out, we decided that we’d travel at least part of the way together. Almost all the villagers came to see us off as we departed.

“Ashley, come on back soon!” said Moichi.

“Yep! I’ll definitely be back!” Ashley promised.

After Moichi playfully ruffled Ashley’s hair, he turned toward us. “And y’all are always welcome to come and visit too. This is a pretty boring little village, so I’m sure everyone will flock to see you when you’re back.”

“Yeah, we’ll definitely come,” I said.

“We’ll be sure to bring some kind of gift next time,” added Filia.

“And Loli Loli, you’re welcome anytime too, ya hear?” said Moichi.

“Okay! I’ll come and play again!”

After saying our goodbyes, we left the village. We rode the Earth Dragon Bus for a while together, until it was time to part ways with Loli Loli.

“This is where I say goodbye! I’m headed in a different direction!” When we got off the Earth Dragon Bus, she turned to me. “But there’s one last thing! I want you to do that thing again! The thing where you make your clothes go boom!”

Hm, well, if she was asking me to do it, I couldn’t just turn her

down. I flexed my pectorals and exploded my jacket. The fabric fluttered through the air. “Satisfied?”

“Dang it, I can’t do it! I haven’t trained enough!” muttered Loli Loli in frustration as she looked at her own body, which was practically a stick.

The fact that she was trying to imitate me was admirable, though. She had a promising future ahead of her.

“I think it’s probably impossible for you right now. But fortunately, you’re still young. Train!”

“But don’t train *too* hard,” said Filia. “Otherwise, you’ll end up with muscles like *that*.”

“I don’t want *that*...” said Loli Loli.

She didn’t like them? But didn’t they look cool?

“I really don’t understand you at all...” muttered Ashley, giving me a repulsed look.

Yeah, well, she was just jealous that Loli Loli thought I was so awesome! Aw, what a cutie.

Meanwhile, Ashley boarded the Earth Dragon Bus once again. Then she came back out with her hands placed behind her back like she was hiding something.

“Hey, Loli Loli?” Ashley called with a slightly nervous tone.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Well, Big Sis and I have a present for you. I hope you’ll accept it. Here...”

“We worked really hard on it yesterday,” said Filia.

Ashley held out some kind of hair accessory—a red ribbon. It was so well-made that I could barely believe it was handcrafted. I’d wondered what the two of them were sneaking around doing yesterday. They’d been making this ribbon, huh? Filia aside, Ashley had a kind of awkward, inconsiderate air. But I supposed that people aren’t always what they seem.

“If you’d told me about this, I could have improved it—made it into a muscle-shaped ribbon or something,” I said.

Filia smiled. “So not telling you was the right choice after all,

hmm?”

Huh? What was that supposed to mean?!

Beside us, Loli Loli accepted the ribbon from Ashley. “Wooow! This is really well-made!” she cooed like she was some kinda ribbon expert. She tied the ribbon into her hair and giggled, adjusting her flower crown as well. “Does it look good on me?”

“Yes, it suits you perfectly,” said Filia.

“I knew it, red is definitely your color, Loli Loli,” said Ashley.

“It does look good, doesn’t it?” I acknowledged.

The red ribbon really complemented her blonde hair. On top of that, it seemed to sort of go with her Gothic Lolita style.

Not that I was really interested in fashion or anything. I mean, I didn’t *really* get it.

Speaking of fashion, I was half-naked at that point, just wearing three-quarter length pants. I’d been wearing a jacket just a bit before, but now it was tattered rags.

“Oh ho ho—eh he he!” Loli Loli had a happy look on her face. Then she pulled the twisted screw figure out of her pocket, the one I’d won for her at the festival. “Yuri gave me this screwy toy! Ashley and Filia gave me this ribbon! The villagers gave me this flower crown! I’ve never had so many people treat me so nicely before! I’m so happy!”

Then, after tucking the figure in her pocket once again, Loli Loli flew off on her icy wings, holding the flower crown close to her head so that it wouldn’t fall off. “I’m going now! These past three days have been the most fun ever! Ashley, Filia, Yuri...and everyone in the village too! I love you all! I hope we meet again! Bye!”

She looked back at us now and again, waving as she flew away. Even up until the end, she was like a whirlwind.

“She’s gone...” said Filia, gazing off into the distance.

“She really was a bundle of energy,” I said.

I stepped up onto the Earth Dragon Bus. Up until then, our journey had been so lively and fun, but now I could already feel it getting lonelier. Before I knew it, I’d grown really close with Loli Loli. But it wasn’t like I could just keep on feeling lonely forever. Time was

limited. And besides, it wasn't like we wouldn't ever see each other again.

The four of us had enjoyed a great time at the festival, and it had been a really nice change of pace. Thanks to that, I felt like I could get even more fired up in my training from here on out!

"Filia, Ashley. I know you miss her already, but it's time to go."

"Oh, yeah." Filia boarded the bus behind me.

But Ashley didn't show any sign that she was getting back on.

"Ashley? What's the matter?" I asked.

"Big Sis...Yuri? There's something I want to say."

"What is it?" asked Filia.

"I'm not going back to Jeepupp. I'm going to train."

As soon as those words left Ashley's mouth, time seemed to stop.

Then Filia suddenly appeared by Ashley's side, like she'd leaped forward. "Ashley?! What are you talking about—this is so sudden!"

This really is sudden, I thought as I stepped back onto the ground. I'd thought for sure that Ashley had wanted to be with Filia, but...

As we approached, Ashley straightened. She told us what she was really feeling. "I'm not very proud of this, but...for the longest time, people told me that I was a prodigy. I was really confident in my strengths. But then I lost against Yuri, and against Loli Loli...and I realized that I still have a long way to go. If I don't get stronger, the next time something happens, I might not be able to save my village or the people precious to me. I can't allow that. That's why I've decided to go train in the mountains over there."

Then, with a faint smile on her lips, she added, "It really took me a long time to come to this decision."

She must have been thinking about her future even while she was enjoying the festival and showing us around her village. Ashley was a lot more mature than I'd realized.

I looked into her eyes. "Ashley, your life belongs to you. If that's what you've decided, then go for it."

"That's...a surprisingly nice thing to say, Yuri. My opinion of you continues to improve," said Ashley.

“I only say nice things!”

She giggled. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Ashley turned her red eyes to Filia. The look in those eyes was so concerned, vulnerable to Filia’s reaction. If Filia tried to stop her, Ashley wouldn’t go. Filia meant too much to Ashley—she wouldn’t be able to resist.

Filia looked up. Even though Filia’s silver eyes were somewhat teary, they were crinkled in a smile full of loving compassion. She met Ashley’s look straight on. “I’m sure that you’ve come to this decision after giving it a lot of thought. I won’t stop you. Ashley, you’re a girl with a strong heart. And, well, I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t going to miss you, but...” She swallowed. “But I want you to stick to your decision, Ashley. Because that’s the Ashley I love.” She placed an adoring hand on Ashley’s head.

“Y-yeah! Okay! Thank you! I love you too, Big Sis!” Ashley hugged Filia tightly, her eyes welling with tears. Filia embraced her in turn.

Finally, it was just the two of us again. Filia and I went on our way, two empty seats beside us. Since our group had dwindled from four to two, there was this sudden stillness. Filia had a lonely look on her face. As I was trying to figure out what to say, Filia opened her mouth to speak first.

“It does seem pretty spacious in here, doesn’t it?” she said quietly, like she was muttering to herself. “It’s lonely.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said. “Are...you okay?”

“You needn’t worry. I won’t leave you, Yuri.” Filia came a bit closer to me. Close enough that our hands were almost touching.

“I mean, I wasn’t really worried about that or nothin’.”

Filia pouted. “What? Come on, that’s not your line. You’re supposed to say something like, oh, I don’t know... ‘Oh, dear Filia, thank you! You’re my emotional support, my anchor,’ or something—and hug me?”

“Do you want me to hug you?”

“I’d sue you for sexual harassment.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

Filia leaned against me. Her head rested against my shoulder. “Well, you seem like you’re feeling pretty lonely too, you know? So, as a special treat, I’ll spend alllll day by your side.”

“Filia...thanks. Please do.”

It was obvious that she was hurting even more than I was, but I wasn’t gonna be uncouth and say it.

Filia’s head was a warmth on my shoulder all the way back to Jeepupp.

Time just flew. A month later, Filia and I were sitting across from one another at a table in our room at the inn, sharing a drink. Filia was still reeling from saying goodbye to Ashley and Loli Loli, so I was trying to console her, even if just a little bit. It was heartbreaking to see her sniffle and cry each night. I thought it would be better if I just let her get it all out, but...

“Hey, I grilled up some chicken breast to have as a snack. Eat up.”

“Breast?! Why did you bring up breasts?! Men are always talking about breasts!”

“You’re already drunk.”

She always got drunk way too fast, every time. It wasn’t just that she couldn’t handle her liquor—this was two sips in! Despite my caution Filia was already chugging her next beer, taking big gulps.

“Whew! I’m shtill not drunk yet, y’know?! Theresh no way I’d get drunk that quick. Whose do you think I am, anyway, huh? I’m the transhcendentally beautiful elf, Filia!” She hiccupped.

Okay, come on...she was *clearly* drunk.

Another ten minutes later, and Filia was sprawled on the table, groaning, still sipping her beer little by little. She was totally smashed.

“Hey, you okay? This, uh, doesn’t look too good...”

“Ashley...Loli Loli...” Filia sniffed.

And now she was a sad drunk, too...

Filia looked at me and her eyes got wide. Then she slammed her hand on the table.

“Yuri, you didn’t drink at all! You’re only making *me* drink...” She hiccupped. “You’re getting me allllll drunk, and then what, you’re going to do something *totally* indecent, eh? Ehh? Aren’t you a human being, Yuri?! You’re so awful...”

There was no getting through to her now. She was the personification of a victimhood complex. There wasn’t even the faintest hint of Filia’s usual dignity in the teary-eyed glare she was shooting me. For the time being, I’d just deal with it.

“I wasn’t thinkin’ about that at all.”

“That’s a big lie! Because I happen! To have! Clairvoyaaaance! I can read your mind!”

Come on, did she really have to point her finger at me? If she bothered to read my thoughts with her Clairvoyance, she’d see I wasn’t thinking about that stuff at all! Then again, if I went out of my way to deny it, she’d just get more ticked off.

Being the mature adult I am, I decided I’d just agree with her. “Okay, sure, I was thinking that. There, you happy?”

“Seeeeee?! I *knew* it! I’m just too cute and adorable, so it makes me a target. Oh, what a sinful girl I am...” For some reason, Filia was giving me a cold look. I just couldn’t keep up with her.

“Don’t just go off the rails.”

“Shut up, shut up! I’m lonely! Listen to me, Yuri!”

“Okay, okay!”

She was way too drunk, so she started running her mouth all over the place. And since she was laying on the table with her legs flapping around like that, I could see her chest. Jeez, she really needed to be more careful about these things. And what was with all those cold looks she was giving me?

“Yuuuuuuri? Is something the matter?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Then let’s keep talking. Oh, those girls were so near and dear to my heart. Not that you aren’t, of course, Yuri! It’s like, well, it’s just different. Yeah, it’s sort of like...they’re little sisters?” Filia nodded,

apparently to herself. “Yeah, little sisters. So, it feels like my two sweet little sisters left me. In other words...simply put...I miss them, I miss theeeeeem!”

“That’s rough.” I was on the same wavelength, so I nodded with a serious look on my face.

But even after all that, Filia couldn’t stop talking about them. I listened to her lament until daybreak. When the yellow morning sunlight poured in through the curtains and lit up the room, I decided to move the completely drunk Filia, who was lying prostrate on the table, over to the bed. Her soft body melted on my back. It was completely different from a guy’s. She wriggled a bit as I carried her.

“Ugh, Yuri, you peeeerv.”

“Don’t make a fuss, or I’ll drop ya,” I said, ignoring her grumbling.

Soon after, I heard gentle breathing against my neck. She was asleep. When I looked at her face, she seemed less troubled. Her mouth was moving slightly as she sleepily mumbled.

“Jeez...” *I hope this is the last time I ever drink with Filia.*

The next day came all too soon.

“Oooof! Yuri, good...morning?” Filia sat up in her bed, rubbed her drowsy eyes, and fixed her disheveled silver hair. “Huh? What? Hm?”

Her eyes scanned the room, then suddenly stopped moving. She winced suddenly, and *hard*. The muscles in her face were twitching.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Well, it’s just, I feel like I have some rather mortifying memories floating around in my head. I want very much to cover my eyes. Um... that...was a dream, wasn’t it?”

She’d been pretty darn drunk, but I guess she still remembered. Flustered as she was, I still told her the truth.

“Unfortunately, that was real.”

“N-no way...”

“Well, I understand how you feel, Filia, so I’ll let it slide.”
Everybody wants to forget their sorrows now and then.

“Ugh...and just when I solidified my reputation as a flawless

beauty!” she huffed.

“Relax, you’ve never had that.”

Filia’s face flushed red as she slipped back into bed and kicked her legs. I’d say she was more of a flaw-ful beauty than a flawless one.

“I’m so embarrassed. Do *not* look at me!”

“Okay, okay!”

I turned toward the wall. The sound of Filia’s legs kicking echoed throughout the room. While Filia was still throwing her embarrassment tantrum, an unexpected knock came at the door. The thumping of Filia’s kicking legs prevented her from noticing, but my well-trained ears clearly detected the sound. I left Filia there, still blissfully ignorant, and headed toward the door. When I opened it, I balked.

“Hey. Filia?”

“What is it, Yuri? I’m *so* embarrassed right now that I feel like I’m going to faint, so *please* just leave it for later unless it’s a matter of *utmost* importance.”

“Well, yeah, it is pretty important.”

I headed over to Filia with our two guests in tow. Said guests approached Filia to properly greet her.

“Long time no see, Big Sis! Ah, I just don’t know what to do with myself after seeing you be so cute, hee hee!”

“It’s been a long time! I came to see you too! You’re welcome!”

Yep. Ashley and Loli Loli had come by.

“While I was training in the mountains, I saw Loli Loli flying through the sky.”

“I was feeling lonely,” said Loli Loli, “so I went to find everyone!”

We sat across from one another in the living room, catching up and sorting out how we’d all come to be together in the same room again.

“I disguised myself by wrapping a scarf around me so strangers wouldn’t find out I’m a majin and make a big fuss!” said Loli Loli energetically. The ribbon the other two girls had gifted her a month ago still sat proudly on her head. “I will make no objections if you tell me

that I'm amazing, of course!"

"And, well, I just finished another stage of my training, so I decided I'd come on back together with Loli Loli. I've gotten stronger, you know? I won't lose to Loli Loli anymore!"

"What was that?! *I'm* not going to lose!" said Loli Loli.

"Ha ha, what about if I come at you with a coochy-coo tickling attack?!"

"Stop! That attack is super-effective! Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!"

Loli Loli rolled around under Ashley's tickling assault, giggling.

Staring at the both of them, Filia broke down in tears. "Yuri, what I'm seeing right now isn't a hallucination created by my own desperate wishes, is it?"

"You can relax. Here." I gently pinched Filia's cheek.

"Ow! It's...not a dream! Ooh, I'm so happy you two are back!"

"I'm happy too!"

"Jeez, Filia, you're a crybaby! You're like a kid!"

"Well, it's been a whole month since I last saw you! Oh, I've been waiting for this day...!"

"I know, right?" I grinned. I'd been with Filia this whole month, so I knew exactly how she felt. With how terribly lonely she'd felt, it was no wonder she was overjoyed now.

"Oh, I'll get you something to drink, so please just wait a minute!" Filia shot up and bounced off toward the kitchen, humming to herself as she went.

"Don't bounce *too* much and take a tumble, okay?"

"Eh he he, I won't do something like that! I am the transcendently beautiful elf, Fili—bah!!"

Welp, I'd tried to tell her.

"Tee hee hee! But that didn't even hurt. Because my girls are back!"

I gave Filia a wry look, but she smiled back at me warmly. She really didn't seem to feel any pain, even though her nose had turned red from the fall. Maybe she was so delighted that her pain receptors had

short-circuited. I did understand how she felt, though.

“I’m really happy you two came back,” I told the girls. “You must have missed my muscles so much.”

“Uh, we didn’t, though?” said Ashley.

“What are you saying, Yuri?” asked Loli Loli. “Let’s think before we speak, okay?”

Wow, harsh. It’d been a month now, so couldn’t they be a little nicer? That being said, I *was* genuinely happy. In fact, I was so overwhelmed with joy that I couldn’t help but start doing push-ups.

“Y-Yuri? What are you doing now?” Filia, having just finished pouring the drinks, gave me a puzzled look.

“I’m just so happy that my body started moving on its own and working out!”

Her look changed from one of confusion to exasperation. “What kind of mechanism is that, exactly?”

More importantly, just doing regular push-ups on their own was too easy, so it wasn’t really worth it—wait a minute!

“Everyone, to celebrate our reunion, get on top of me!” I exclaimed, pointing to my back.

“Yay!” Loli Loli instantly jumped onto my back.

An immediate response, just as I’d expect from Loli Loli! She was the same as ever.

Ashley, by contrast, seemed less than enthusiastic about the idea.

“What in the...?”

“Ashley. Don’t think. *Feel*. You’ve trained in the mountains. You should know what I mean.”

“I don’t understand you at all, though?”

Hm. That method wasn’t gonna fly. She was pretty tough. Well, then, maybe I could get her riled up?

“Oh, well, I suppose there really is a big difference between someone who can jump in without hesitation and someone who can’t, right, Ashley?”

“What? What kinda cheap provocation is that? Do you think that I’ll take it seriously? ...Well, then, maybe I *will* get on your back!”

But...she just *had* taken me seriously, right? Like, completely?

In any case, Ashley sat on my back. The only one left was Filia.

“Come on—you too, Filia. Hop on up.”

“I know, I know. No matter what I say now, you’re not going to listen to me when you’re in one of these moods, hmm?”

Filia, the person who knew me best of all, sat on my back with a thud. With all three of them weighing down on me, I could at least get a somewhat proper workout in!

“HOOAH!”

I started doing push-ups. In terms of physical weight, it wasn’t all that much, really. For someone like me, who sometimes did push-ups while carrying boulders many times my height, the three of them were terribly light, even all together.

But I felt a *different* kind of weight on me. It was a weight I didn’t feel when I was carrying boulders. Yes, this was surely...“the weight of friendship”! I didn’t really know why, but it made me feel something. For some reason, it brought back memories of those long, long days I’d spent living alone in the forest.

When I lived in the forest, I’d never imagined I would have so many friends. I’d left the forest to become stronger, and I was pretty sure I had. I didn’t really know if I’d managed to grow as a *person*, but...

“Don’t worry, Yuri,” said Filia from atop my back. “You *are* growing.”

Clairvoyance again, huh? Or...no, wait. I bet she didn’t even need to use it. She’d said she could read me perfectly well without it. Which was fine by me, because the important thing was what she’d just said.

“Filia...thanks.”

“No need to thank me!” she replied in her usual carefree manner. That was exactly how I knew she wasn’t lying.

I’m glad Filia is my partner. I smiled, though no one could see it on account of how they were all on my back.

“Thanks to that, Filia, I’m just bursting with confidence! So, as my way of saying thanks, I’m gonna show you just how much I’ve grown. I’m gonna do push-ups ten times faster!”

“I—I might have said a bit too much. Yuri, I would like you to

reconsider—”

“Here I go!”

“Ah, he’s not listening!”

I amped up my speed by a power of ten. Seen from the side, I was definitely leaving afterimages. The three girls on my back were no doubt having the time of their lives, like they were on a ride at an amusement park! Working out is fun, after all!

“Wait, you’re going too fast!” wailed Filia. “Yuri, you’re going too *fasht*—ah, I jush bid my tongue!”

“Eeeek! I’m not good at handling scary rides!” shouted Ashley. “Save me, Big Sis!”

“Ah ha ha ha! Up and down, up and down! This is fun!”

Screams and cheers of delight echoed throughout the room, melding together. Things always got pretty lively when we were together.

And so, I continued doing push-ups with a satisfied smile on my face.



MUSCLES ARE BETTER THAN MAGIC
CHARACTER DESIGN



✦ **"FLAME PRINCESS"**
ASHLEY





★ LOLI LOLI
LUKIS ISARETT



CHARACTER DESIGN



 **JAVAGIIR**



CHARACTER DESIGN

DORANEKO

AUTHOR PROFILE

Lives in Saitama Prefecture.

Started writing after thinking, “I’ll become a novelist,” and thought that would be a fun way to give shape to their imagination and fantasies. Since then, Doraneko has fallen steadily in love with writing. In 2017, *Muscles Are Better than Magic* made its debut, published by MF Books.

According to Doraneko, “I wrote this story with the goal of making something fun that could make people laugh.”

Doraneko’s hobbies include listening to music and reading. They are especially fond of manga.



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